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RECKONING

Vol. I.

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III.

THE DAY OF RECKONING.

BY FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY.

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THE DAY OF RECKONING.

PART I.

I.

It is the dawn of springtide. The leaves are budding on all the trees, and women are donning the bright attire suitable to the season. Paris welcomes back the returning sunbeams which promise to cheer the heart and ripen the strawberries, and the cold weather, which was excessive during the late winter, has gone where the old moons go. The chestnut trees of the Tuilleries garden rear their plume-like blossoms amid the breezes. Birds are carolling on the topmost boughs, and from every nest there comes a chirp of joy.

It is just the day for a wedding, and in many a Parisian church men and women are being married, for better or worse. There are weddings at Belleville, weddings in the Faubourg St. Honoré, weddings in the Chaussee d'Antin, weddings in the Marais, weddings in every part of the city. The suburban dining-rooms, said to be capable of accommodating a hundred guests are scarcely large enough for the number of merrymakers, and in the wealthier neighbourhoods the notaries and dressmakers are almost beside themselves. There is dining and dancing among the lower classes, and lunching and signing of contracts among the wealthy ; and on all sides, among high and low, the inevitable orange blossom is greatly in demand.

Yesterday, there was a wedding at La Trinité, the handsome church at the top of the Chaussee d'Antin, which is approached through a charming square, verdant with lawns, and umbrageous with leafy chestnut trees. Children play there in the gravel walks, and birds dip their tiny beaks in the plashing fountains. Lovers exchange their vows in the more secluded corners, and old couples, married thirty or forty years ago, sit down in the shade and think how pleasant their life has been. With these surroundings, the grass, the foliage and the flowers, the mirth of children, the stolen kisses of youth and the affectionate converse of old age, it would seem indeed as if a wedding celebrated at such a church must necessarily be a happy one.

At all events, the ceremony now in progress was at least extremely brilliant. Two beadles, gorgeous in gold lace, stood in the main entrance with their halberts in their hands, making the wide doorway fairly glitter. In the towers above, the bells were pealing merrily, and their silver voices seemed to proclaim the joyfulness of new-found happiness. Carriages were driving up one after another with their spirited horses at a fast trot. A

crowd had gathered to see them pass—one of those motley throngs in which all types of Parisian society are mingled—well-dressed gentlemen pausing in their stroll ; workgirls who, having escaped from their sewing-rooms, were sighing as they gazed at the costly dresses ; people of the middle classes in search of something to stare at without paying for the show ; errand boys neglectful of their duties, and pickpockets with an eye to business—in fact, the kind of people who like to follow stylish funerals, and who, in the case of a wedding, stop in front of the church to see if the bride is pretty or otherwise.

Two well-dressed men, whose attire showed that they had been specially invited to the ceremony, were leaning against the outside railing of La Trinité, in easy attitudes, carelessly gesticulating as they chatted together and criticised the different equipages, and the ladies who alighted from them.

“ Bless me ! ” exclaimed the shorter of the two, a good-looking, fair-haired young fellow, who was examining the new arrivals through an eyeglass, “ here are the Neufgermaines in a hired vehicle at thirty francs a day, and a gratuity to the driver. What can that mean ? ”

“ My dear fellow, ” replied his companion, a tall, dark young man, “ only the wealthy indulge in miserly freaks of that kind. The Neufgermaines have a hundred thousand francs a year. They must be economising to make up their daughter’s dowry.”

“ Well, it shows their wisdom, for they will never marry her off without one. She’s ugly enough to make a horse bolt with fright, besides being very disagreeable. She always looks to me as if she had been sucking a sour orange.”

“ Don’t be abusive, my dear Busserolles ; you know very well that you would be only too happy to marry her. Five hundred thousand to start with, and great expectations into the bargain, are not to be sneered at by any means.”

“ No ; not when a fellow happens to be played out as you are ; but I’m in no such pickle you see.”

“ You will be, sure enough. I give you my word for it, and the word of Guy de Bautru of Anjou is not to be despised. The custom of wearing gardénias in one’s buttonhole always leads up to one thing, you know.”

“ You are vastly mistaken, my fine fellow. Gardénias may be expensive, but the man who never gambles and never drinks doesn’t come to grief, especially when he has no particular fancy for gay women.”

“ Ahem ! I see you mean that I am riding in ‘ Satan’s Coach,’ as they used to say in the olden time. Wine, cards, and woonan ! There’s a song about that in *Robert le Diable*. Well, well, my patrimony may be on the wing, but at all events I have an uncle left.”

“ You mean your uncle Souscarrière ? But he is as strong as a Roman bridge ; and remember, uncles with money to leave may grow old but they never die.”

“ The trut’ is that he enjoys as good health as any man. He is nearly sixty now, an’ yet he rides on horseback seven hours a day. We have iron constitutions in my family.”

“ Well, I knew that you yourself hadn’t a wooden one. You can’t see a pretty woman without falling in love with her. Last year you were badly stricken with Madeleine de Maugars.”

“ Oh ! I have got over that, and the best proof of it is that I have come to her wedding.”

“ Bah ! you only do so, because you don’t care to let her father fancy that

you owe him a grudge—for he closed his doors to you, didn't he? However, I'll venture to say that you'll make a wry face when the time comes to bow to her in the vestry, and to her husband also. By-the-bye, where did this unexpected eligible bachelor come from? Who is he, this Estelan? Nobody seems to know him."

"Nor do I, either. He burst upon Paris like a bombshell some six months ago. People say he made a fortune in Mexico, or somewhere in those parts, and that he comes of a good stock. However, he has no friends in our circle, and he doesn't belong to any club. On the other hand, he is on visiting terms with some highly respectable persons. The Neufgermains receive him, for instance. I believe that he was introduced to Monsieur de Maugars at their house."

"Good! Now I know what I wanted to find out. If he had been any catch at all, the Neufgermains would have pounced upon him for their own daughter."

"They hadn't half a chance. It seems that he fell in love with the beautiful Madeleine at first sight, and it appears she fancied him."

"It is a love match, then!"

"And a good match too. Maugars isn't the man to accept a son-in-law haphazard."

"Ahem! That old beau docsn't seem much of a wiseacre to me. He is said to have been very wild when he was young, and to have kept up the same kind of life when he grew to be middle-aged. I fancy he mismanages his affairs. He is said to have a fortune, but he isn't known to possess any landed property."

"Pruneaux, his notary, knows all about that. The count's fortune is in hard cash, and it seems he has plenty of it. Pruneaux must be well acquainted with the amount, as he takes care of it for him. There he is, now, that estimable man of the law, alighting from his respectable-looking landau. Behold the model of a State notary! His very carriage looks prim and staid like himself! Pruneaux is a notary of the old school. If I had any money to put by, he would be just the man to keep it for me."

"Oh! he wouldn't be my man. I don't believe in the infallibility of people who have never been found wanting. They always come to grief some day or other. I sometimes meet Pruneaux in the Champs Elysées in his family carriage, and I have often noticed that he has a strange way of looking at the women as they drive home from the Bois de Boulogne—but, dash it all, there's Frédoc! Does he know Monsieur de Maugars?"

"I think not. But perhaps he knows the bridegroom. When I see him at the club to-night I shall ask him all about that fellow Estelan. He knows everything, Frédoc does."

"But no one knows anything about him. You, yourself, couldn't tell me who he is and how he lives."

"He was and is still a gentleman of very lively and amiable disposition. He is very obliging, and I presume that he lives as most people do. He hasn't become an egotist like most old bachelors—a very rare circumstance, allow me to tell you. But now oblige me by keeping quiet. You prevent me from watching the arrivals; and, see, here comes the bride!"

"In a brougham with a splendid pair of horses, upon my word! Carriage, animals, coachman, footman, the whole turn-out is perfect."

"And Madeleine herself is bewitchingly beautiful," said Guy de Bautru, who had eyes for Mademoiselle de Maugars alone.

Bewitchingly beautiful she was, indeed, with her big black eyes, her

alabaster skin, and ripe, smiling lips. Her's was a haughty creole beauty, softened by Parisian winsomeness.

She passed by like an angelic vision, and as she ascended the church steps a murmur of admiration arose from the crowd which had gathered round about the portico.

The Count de Maugars, who gave his arm to his daughter, did not look his age. His figure was slight, his nose aquiline, and he wore a curly moustache, twirled up at the ends. He looked like a guardsman of the days of the Restoration, although he was not old enough to have seen service at the court of Charles X.

"I shouldn't care to have the count for a father-in-law," whispered Busserolles in his companion's ear. "He must be a disagreeable sort of man to associate with. Let's look at the happy husband. He's very good-looking indeed. Thirty at the most, with the bearing of a staff-officer. A trifle pale, perhaps. Who's that old witch going in with him? His mother? Has he a mother living, then?"

"Neither mother nor father. He doesn't appear to have any relations at all."

"You might as well say at once that Maugars has taken a foundling for his son-in-law."

"I know nothing about it, except that he has lent his cousin, the Marchioness de Puygarrault, to his relationless son-in-law. If that venerable old witch, as you call her, hadn't deigned to enter the bridegroom's carriage, Estelan would have had no one with him in walking up to the altar."

"She's a nice companion for the occasion, I must say! She's eighty, if she's a minute, your marchioness!"

"Oh! she's the best creature in the world. She likes me very much, and made a great deal of me when I visited the Maugars; and if she had been allowed to have her way——"

"You would have married the charming young woman who is now called Madame d'Estelan; for she was married, in civil fashion, you know, at the municipal offices on the day before yesterday. But you must be already consoled, as you did not refuse the invitation sent you by her father, who refused your overtures; and the time has now come for proving your resignation by witnessing the nuptial benediction bestowed upon the faithless one."

"Oh! the church won't be crowded. Maugars has few friends, and Estelan has none. We might sit in the first row," said Bautru, as he went towards a side door which gave access to the church.

Just at that moment Busserolles nudged his elbow and said in a low tone: "Do you see, there, in front of us, that shape, that air? One would swear it was——"

"Antonia, of course—and in a very simple dress, and veiled to her very chin! I should know her among a thousand from her way of carrying her head like a mare that's reined in too tight. What the deuce can she have come here for?"

"Did you know that after the autumn races her furniture was seized, and that she couldn't get a franc anywhere? Now, however, she's in full feather again. A fine carriage, with Anglo-Norman horses, pictures, diamonds, and so on."

"Let's leave Antonia and her mysteries. If we stay talking here, they'll begin without us."

Busserolles said no more, and they went in. The bridal pair were already seated in front of the red velvet prayer-desks. The Count de Maugars was standing on the left of his daughter, while on the right, not far from the bridegroom, the septuagenary Marchioness de Puygarrault was kneeling. The other chairs reserved for the families of the bride and bridegroom were altogether unoccupied.

The majestic beadles of La Trinité had probably never before seen a couple with so few relations. All the guests, however, belonged to the best society. M. de Maugars lived in retirement, but by birth he belonged to the aristocracy. Very distinguished persons had married into his family, and he had kept up his connection with the Faubourg Saint-Germain. So if there were not many wedding-guests, such as were there were all people of high standing.

Bautru and Busserolles had no difficulty in finding seats near the choir. They also had been invited by the father of the bride: Bautru, because he was the nephew of one of M. de Maugars's old companions-in-arms; Busserolles, because he was Bautru's friend, introduced by him to the count at a time when the latter frequently entertained people at his house. However, Busserolles had only come to while away his time, while Bautru was going through with a somewhat disagreeable social duty.

Having greatly diminished the fortune left him by his father, he was extremely desirous of remaining in the good graces of an uncle whose property he hoped to inherit some day or other, and that uncle, who lived in Anjou had never failed in his letters to urge him to keep up a friendly connection with the Count de Maugars, his old comrade in the First Regiment of the Chasseurs d'Afrique. Bautru had complied; and, in the result he had fallen seriously in love with Madeleine de Maugars, who had not at first seemed insensible to his advances. But, unfortunately, the count had never encouraged them. He had received the young fellow very kindly, but without any thought of bestowing his daughter upon him. In fact, he had allowed it to be clearly seen that he had other views for her. So Guy de Bautru, to console himself for this disappointment, had climbed into Satan's Coach again, and resumed his former life, which could not fail to bring him to ruin.

But little, however, would have been needed to bring him to a better course. Madeleine's beautiful eyes had wrought a reform for a time, and he had longed to shake off the old man for good. But, one day, those beaming eyes had turned from him, and he could not guess why so sudden a coldness had arisen. Then M. de Maugars went to pass the winter at Pau, and on his return he began to live in comparative retirement. The rumour was soon spread about that he had found a husband for Madeleine, a young man who was very well off, but quite unknown in Paris, where he had just arrived after a long stay in America.

This news had seemed strange, and many unfavourable comments had been made upon it. But as, after all, the match was a good one for a young girl who had but a dowry of two hundred thousand francs, it was finally decided that M. de Maugars knew what he was about. Poor Guy de Bautru himself confessed that his own fortune was not such as to tempt a wise father to give him his daughter. He resigned himself, but the marriage made him feel sad, and he had not come to see it of choice. He was now looking gloomily at the bride, who appeared lovelier than ever under her long veil and wreath of orange blossom.

Busserolles, much less impressed, gazed at the guests, the ladies

especially, and at some other women, who had not been invited to the ceremony. He noticed Antonia, and her presence greatly puzzled him. He spied her out as she leaned against a pillar on the lower side of the nave. She had raised her veil, and her smiling looks showed that she had come there simply for pastime. Busserolles even remarked that she was exchanging glances with some one, and he turned round to see who had attracted her attention; but he only saw some serious-looking persons whose demeanour was not suggestive of gallantry, and as Antonia's performances had but little interest for him, he directed his attention elsewhere.

The religious ceremony had now begun. The officiating priest was reading the usual prayers of the liturgy of the Roman church, and the young couple listened attentively. The Count de Maugars looked at his daughter, and his manly face evinced deep emotion. The Marchioness de Puygarrault on her side seemed delighted at playing a conspicuous part at her dear little cousin's marriage.

"All these people look as merry as though they had won the big prize in the lottery," thought Busserolles. "Marriage is decidedly a fine thing."

At the moment when he arrived at this conclusion he again perceived M. Frédoc, whom he had remarked on entering the church, and the sight of that gentleman to some extent changed his ideas. M. Frédoc was a confirmed bachelor, and although he was certainly more than sixty years old, he seemed so contented with his lot that he passed for a sage who had so ordered his life as to be perfectly happy. He was gazing at the bridegroom with the sympathetic curiosity of a man who looks on while a friend sets sail for unknown shores, and who has not the least wish to do the same. When the young couple had exchanged rings, and the priest had pronounced the holy words which bound them to one another for life, a smile appeared upon the old bachelor's lips, and his face assumed an indefinable expression.

"Does he envy them their happiness, or is he laughing in his sleeve?" said Busserolles, in a whisper to his companion.

"Neither, my dear friend," said Bautru, in the same tone. "Frédoc is a benevolent philosopher. He knows that conjugal happiness does not always last long, but he is making sincere wishes for Monsieur d'Estelan's, and hoping that it may never end."

"Well, I think that he is pitying him for starting on a perilous adventure. But look over there, in front of the small door near the choir."

"What at? The bcadle? He is superb; he looks like a field-marshal."

"Yes, so he does, but I am talking of those three strange-looking men who have just taken up their position in one corner. If Estelan invited them he must have very singular friends. What heads! What manners!"

"Do you really imagine that there is nobody here but the people who have been invited? The church is open to everybody. Those men were walking in the street, most likely, and saw some handsome carriages outside, so they came in to take a look at the bride."

"No, for they have not taken their eyes off the bridegroom. They keep staring fixedly at him."

"You don't know what you are saying, and our neighbours are quite scandalised by our whispering. The mass has begun. Try to behave yourself properly, or if you can't stop talking scandal, go and wait for me in the square. Look! there's Frédoc slipping off quietly. Do the same."

"So he is, upon my word! He's going off, our worthy Frédoc! It appears that he has seen enough. You must confess that he has a strange

way of behaving, that gentleman. When a person is invited to a marriage ceremony he can stay away if he likes, but if he comes he ought to stay till it is over. I am staying because I am a well-bred man."

"So you are, but do be quiet, I implore you!"

Busserolles, this time, remained silent. He went on observing, but he kept the result of his observations to himself.

The nuptial benediction was followed by a solemn mass, a musical mass, and Guy de Bautru had plenty of time to reflect upon the air which it would suit him to assume when he went into the vestry. The interview with M. de Maugars did not embarrass him much. He knew that there would only be an exchange of a few friendly words. He could no longer aspire to marry Madeleine, and so the count had no longer any reason for treating him coldly.

But to go up through a crowd of persons, all of whom were indifferent to him, to a young girl whom he had loved, and who now belonged to another, was hard, and Guy was asking himself at this moment how he should bear the painful test. He tried to assume a cold expression; to find some words which would express what he felt, and go straight to the heart of the wife and annoy her husband. But he could not think of what to say. Such words are never thought of except when one is on the outside steps, and the chance for saying them is lost. However, his face did not betray his feelings, and he felt sure of being quite composed when in face of the enemy.

Pride was one of Guy de Bautru's defects—or good qualities. Paris life had not softened his disposition, although he had entered into it very fully, and without caring as to what companions he mingled with. He was capable of all kinds of weaknesses, but he remained proud. He had, besides, reconciled himself to the ruin of his matrimonial hopes, and he did not intend to meet the Estelans again, after making the required bow to them that day.

When the critical moment came, Mademoiselle de Mangars' defeated suitor had resumed his self-possession, and walked very deliberately toward the vestry, which the newly married pair had just entered to receive the congratulations of their friends. Busserolles walked on in front of Bautru, and had already begun chattering again.

"That Frédoc has managed very cleverly," said he, in a whisper; "he has escaped the final crush. It is strange; there are not fifty people in the church, and yet there is as great a crush here as though they were all rushing out of a theatre. And, indeed, it is a 'first performance'—first and only; but this jostling is outrageous, and if those rascally-looking chaps were here whom I pointed out to you a little while ago I should look out for my watch. But I don't see them. They've made off, like Frédoc."

Bautru did not take the trouble to question these idle words. He was preparing to cross the difficult passage, and was anxious to get through with this "last appearance" before the bride. The vestry was already full when he entered it, and he could now examine the married pair for a few seconds before finding himself face to face with them.

M. d'Estelan seemed to him less gay than the occasion called for. He made a courteous bow in return to those which were made to him, but he did not speak a word. His wife, on the contrary, smiled upon all who came up, and allowed herself to be kissed with a good grace by the ladies, young and old. She certainly felt no regrets, and saw a rosy future before her. Guy, somewhat surprised and no less vexed at seeing her so smiling,

assumed his most indifferent air on greeting her. Busserolles had just made his bow when he presented himself.

"Monsieur de Bautru, the nephew of my father's best friend," said Madeleine, introducing him to her husband, who remained as cold as the North Pole.

This icy reception wounded the last of the Bautrus to the quick. He made a very rapid bow and passed on without uttering a word. But he was stopped by the count, who was standing beside his daughter. "Thanks for having come, my dear Guy," said the old gentleman, pressing his hand. "Your uncle ought to have done the same himself."

Bautru was about to reply to this gracious welcome, when the Marchioness de Puygarrant came to the rescue. "Yes, my dear boy," said she, "it was very kind of you to come, but your uncle is unpardonable for remaining in the depths of his woods when Maugars is giving Madeleine away in marriage, and I beg you to write and tell him that I look upon him as a bear, a perfect savage, a peasant of the Bas-Maine."

After this singular compliment there was nothing to be done but bow and depart.

He found Busserolles waiting for him near the main entrance of the church, and as he insisted upon seeing the carriages drive off, they placed themselves near the entrance of the peristyle, where the newly-married pair were awaited by a brand-new brougham, a marvel of elegance and good taste, in which so far no one had ever sat.

A little further back stood some other handsome equipages, less new and stylish in appearance, which had brought M. de Maugars and his daughter and M. d'Estelan and the marchioness to the church.

"That is as it should be!" exclaimed Busserolles; "those people understand things. They know that now that the young couple are married, they ought to have a carriage to themselves. I suppose that, in order to be correct all through, they will go away this evening. A husband who has any respect for himself cannot pass his honeymoon anywhere but upon his own estate."

"When he has an estate. But Monsieur d'Estelan has nothing but an income," replied Bautru, disdainfully. "I imagine that they will go first to Maugars' house. It is near here. You can see it now, if you look—that large one at the corner of the Rue Saint-Lazare."

"Good, I see! There will be a lunch at four, and after that Estelan will take his wife away with him. Where does he live?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. Let us go."

"Not till we have seen the wedding-procession pass out. We shall not have to wait long. Do you hear the halberds striking the pavement?"

"I have had enough of this. Let us go."

"Presently. Look over there, near the door. There's one of those three scamps that we saw before. He seems to be watching the bride and bridegroom. Where are the two others? Ah! I see one of them in the middle of the street. The third cannot be far off."

"Do let me alone! I am going," answered Bautru, turning away.

But Busserolles held on to his arm. Madelcine and her husband appeared upon the threshold of the church, and, in spite of the efforts which poor Guy made to break away, he had the pain of seeing the last scene of a play in which he had played but a sorry part. He saw the happy pair get into the dazzling brougham, which shot away as quickly as a falling star; he saw the count enter the second carriage, which followed

the first, and he even saw the marchioness drive off after a footman had assisted her in getting into the third.

"And now that the fun is over," said Busserolles, "I am ready to go with you."

"Thank you ! I can do without you. I have business to attend to," replied Bautru, impatiently.

"You are going to meditate on the inconstancy of young girls. That's right ! I have a mind to go and see Antonia. But I shall find you this evening at the Champs Élysées, I hope. The weather is splendid. It would be a good night for the Circus and Mabille. But see, you are right ! They are going to Maugars', that is to say—no, not the old dowager. Her carriage is taking her back to the Faubourg Saint-Germain. But the bride's carriage has just driven into the courtyard, and her noble papa's follows after."

"Good-bye ! I'm off !" cried Bautru. And he fled towards the Rue Blanche.

Busserolles was not mistaken. The count was going home. His daughter and son-in-law had already ascended the stairs when he alighted from his carriage in front of the house where he lived, a handsome new building, of which he occupied the second floor. At the moment when M. de Maugars also was about to set foot upon the stairs, to go and join the young couple, he saw a gentleman approaching whom he had not caught sight of before. This individual emerged from the doorkeeper's lodge and advanced, hat in hand. He was very well dressed, and the count, surprised at being accosted by a stranger, thought it best to stop at once to find out what he wanted.

"Excuse me, sir," began the new comer, "I am a police-agent."

"Ah !" said M. de Maugars, drawing himself up ; "what do you wish with me ?"

"I have come to fulfil a painful mission. I have a warrant of arrest."

"For whom, if you please ?" asked the count, in amazement.

"For Monsieur d'Estelan, your son-in-law," replied the police-agent, lowering his voice.

"A warrant to arrest my son-in-law ! This is some joke, no doubt."

"Excuse me, sir, it is, unfortunately, very serious. I can prove who I am and that I have the warrant ; but this place appears to me somewhat unsuitable for acquainting you with this sad affair, and if you will be kind enough to take me to your rooms we can avoid all scandal. That is what I was told to do, and I very much wish to obey my instructions."

At this polite but firm declaration the count almost gave way to anger, but controlling himself he said, in a dry tone : "Of what is Monsieur d'Estelan accused ? Of some political offence, I suppose ?"

"No, sir. Of theft."

"Theft ! That is absurd. There is a mistake in the name or the person."

"I assure you, sir, that no doubt is possible. You will see this yourself if you listen to what I have to tell."

The count hesitated for a moment. He was strongly tempted to send the officer to the devil. But the doorkeeper was looking on from afar ; he might listen to the conversation, and it promised to be anything but pleasant. "Very well," said M. de Maugars. "Follow me, if you please."

And he ran up the stairs four at a time. When he reached the door of his flat the young couple were gone. "Where is my daughter ?" he asked of the footman, who now appeared.

"She has gone to change her dress," replied the servant, looking askance at the gentleman clad in black from head to foot who accompanied his master, and adding : "Monsieur d'Estelan is waiting for you in the drawing-room."

"Very well. Tell him that I will go to him in a few moments, and then come back here again. If any one comes to ask for me don't let him in. I cannot see any one at present, not any one, do you hear ? Let us go into my private room," added the count, turning to the detective.

The detective entered, after having made sure at one glance that the flat had but one door opening upon the landing.

The room into which the count conducted him was lighted by two windows, overlooking the street, almost in front of the church of La Trinité, and it was plainly furnished, with some leather-seated chairs, an oak book-case, an ebony table inlaid with brass, three or four pictures representing military scenes, and a panoply of modern weapons. There were no Japanese sabres, no idle elegancies, no costly curiosities. It was obvious at once that it was the apartment of an old soldier who did not believe in fashionable frivolities.

"I think, sir," began the officer, "I think that I first ought to inform you that the police are watching the house, and that if your son-in-law goes into the street he will be arrested at once. That would be a great pity, for a scandal would ensue ; whereas, if you persuade him to go with me, everything can be got through with, and there will be no disturbance."

"My son-in-law will not attempt to escape," replied the count scornfully." "A man who has nothing to reproach himself with does not make off like a robber. Speak, and tell me everything. I am willing to listen, but I must beg you to be brief."

"I will be so, sir, and I will endeavour, also, to be clear. Your nephew is named Louis Charles Vallouris, called Estelan."

"Vallouris d'Estelan," said M. de Maugars. "The name of Estelan is that of his great grandfather on the mother's side."

"It does not appear on his certificate of birth, and it seems that he has only assumed it since he left France. It matters little, however, as a proof of his identity, whether the name really belongs to him, or has been assumed by him. Louis Charles Vallouris was born at Istres, in the department of the Bouches-du-Rhône, on the 15th February, 1849. His father was a retired naval officer ; his mother, who died when he was born, was a creole of La Martinique. He was seventeen when he lost his father, who did not leave him anything, and he entered a cominercial house in Marseilles as a clerk."

"All that is true. Monsieur d'Estelan left in 1871 for Mexico, where he made an independent fortune in a very honourable manner. You see that I know his history. What are you aiming at by telling it to me ?"

"I aim at convincing you, sir, that I am not mistaken, and that your son-in-law is really the man who I am sent to arrest."

"For theft?"

"With burglary. Yes, sir, Louis Vallouris, before leaving Marseilles, forced open his employer's safe, and took from it the sum of thirty-three thousand francs."

"That is not true."

"It is true until the contrary is proved. The law will decide. In the meantime, the facts are as follows : the theft was discovered on the day

after Louis Vallouris' flight. He disappeared one evening, without any signs having been given that he was preparing to fly with the money belonging to the merchant who employed him. The investigations proved that he alone could have taken the money, and he was actively sought for. But he had had time to hide himself, and had laid his plans carefully, for it was impossible to find him. The war with Prussia had begun. The search was suspended and the proceedings also, and the matter remained where it was. Later on, various indications led to the belief that Vallouris had enlisted in a company of sharp-shooters, and that he had been killed. This is the reason why there was no judgment given against him in his absence."

"Then he was not convicted," said the count, who had listened with agitated attention to this narrative.

"No, sir, and until quite recently it seemed likely that he would not be tried at all, for a criminal action cannot be brought after the lapse of ten years, and the last measures taken against Vallouris go back as far as September, 1870. He could soon have availed himself of the law of limitation, and justice would not have inquired into his affairs. But towards the end of last year, the public prosecutor at Marseilles received an anonymous letter stating that Vallouris had returned to France and must be in Paris. The magistrate reported this to the prefect of police, and a search was begun which had no result.

"It must be said that it was not very actively carried on. The affair was an old one, and we had a great many more recent ones on hand. Besides, the merchant who had been robbed in 1870 was dead, after becoming a bankrupt, and the witnesses who could identify Vallouris are all at Marseilles. Besides, Vallouris had changed his name and lived in a circle to which no one supposed he could have had access. It was almost decided to give up looking for him; but yesterday the prefect received a denunciatory letter, anonymous like the first one, and most probably sent by the same person. This new letter gave precise details. Its writer declared that Louis Vallouris, who was now called Louis d'Estelan, lived in Paris, at No. 99 Rue de Rome, and that he had been married the evening before to the only daughter of the Count de Maugars, at the municipal offices of the ninth arrondissement. I beg you to believe, sir, that if we had known this twenty-four hours earlier, the administration would have taken measures to spare you this cruel affliction. Unfortunately, it was too late. The civil ceremony had been accomplished."

"And you thought it unnecessary to prevent the religious marriage," said the count, bitterly. "I am really very much obliged to you."

"Be good enough to listen, sir, and you will see, I hope, that we acted with all the prudence, and at the same time all the rapidity that we could under the circumstances. The information reached the prefect's office, last evening, a little before midnight. It was necessary to begin by verifying the exactitude of the various particulars which were given. Early this morning I went to examine the documents which Monsieur d'Estelan had deposited at the municipal offices before being married, and I saw that his certificate of birth and the papers relating to the death of his father and mother were absolutely identical with those which had been collected in reference to the Vallouris affair. The question was settled, but I did not content myself with that. I wished to satisfy myself that our information concerning Vallouris' personal appearance really related to Monsieur d'Estelan, and this could not be found out until

after the ceremony, for I did not wish to arrest him without being absolutely sure that I was not mistaken. I found that Monsieur d'Estelan was here in your rooms, and I had to wait till he came out ; I saw him pass by when he was going to the church in the carriage of one of your lady relatives, and then I no longer entertained any doubts. A photograph had been sent to me from Marseilles, and although it was taken ten years ago, I had no difficulty in recognising Louis Vallouris in Monsieur d'Estelan. Shall I show you the portrait?"

The count replied by a gesture of refusal.

"Things being as they are," continued the police-agent, "you will admit, sir, that I have done everything for the best. I did not wish to arrest your son-in-law in the presence of the crowd in the street. Still less did I think of arresting him in the church. It would have created useless scandal, for the civil marriage being binding there was no longer any means of preventing the misfortune which had fallen upon an honourable family. So I contented myself with ordering the doors to be watched, and as I knew that Monsieur d'Estelan would come straight from La Trinité to your house, I remained waiting for him at your door. And if I first applied to you, sir, it was because I hoped that you would act in concert with me, so that I might do my duty without exciting the attention of your servants. If Monsieur d'Estelan consents to go with me, no one here will know where I am taking him."

All this was said in a mild tone, and a quiet manner—the tone and manner of a person who brings bad news, and seeks to excuse himself for being a bird of ill omen.

There was not a word to find fault with, and M. de Maugars did not attempt to dispute the assertions made. It was easy to see on his manly face what stirred in his heart, but he said nothing. What reply could he make to the polite and courteous envoy of the law? He would greatly have preferred to have had some rough officer to deal with, whom he might have had the pleasure of turning out of doors, so as to vent his rage upon some one.

But it was necessary to speak and arrive at some decision. The case was one of those which cannot be deferred, and M. de Maugars could not attempt to make light of it. "What will happen, sir," he asked abruptly, "if you arrest Monsieur d'Estelan?"

"The law will take its usual course," replied the agent, somewhat surprised. "It will, no doubt, end in the Assize Court of the Bouches-du-Rhône, and that is very fortunate, for in Paris it would have made a great stir."

"Ah!" said M. de Maugars, bitterly, "do you fancy, then, that my name will be any the less dishonoured because my son-in-law will be tried at two hundred leagues from here?"

"Your name, sir, will not be brought up. The most respectable family may be deceived. Such things happen every day, and I declare that—"

"I do not ask you to judge of the consequences of the arrest. I ask what you will do with Monsieur d'Estelan."

"I shall take him before the magistrate, who will question him, and afterwards he will be sent to Marseilles, where the proceedings will be opened."

"And the final result of the suit will be the Assize Court, and the conviction of the culprit, will it not?"

"That is not certain. The jury will take into consideration the

prisoner's age at the time when the crime was committed, the time which has since elapsed, the facts which followed. Monsieur d'Estelan seems to have made money in foreign parts, and must be able to restore the stolen sum."

"Stolen!" repeated M. de Maugars; "my daughter has married a thief!"

"There are many extenuating circumstances in this matter. It may not even go before the court. At the end of ten years, proofs are almost always wanting, and if those which can be got together do not suffice, the investigating magistrate having the case in hand will declare the prosecution null and void.

"Enough, sir! No matter what happens afterwards, it will be known to-morrow that the husband of Mademoiselle de Maugars has been arrested and sent to prison. Whether he be sent to the galleys or set free, my daughter and I will suffer the same shame."

"You exaggerate, sir," replied the agent. "I know very well that public opinion is often unjust, but if Monsieur d'Estelan can justify himself immediately——"

"One word, sir! Would his death stop the proceedings?"

"Of course."

"And might I hope that nothing would be heard of the affair?"

"Certainly, if the accused were dead the affair would remain where it is, and the law would have no interest in spreading it about. But there is one man who knows Monsieur d'Estelan's past—the man who denounced him."

"Do you know the wretch's name?"

"No. His letters are at the prefecture, but he took good care not to sign them, and there is little or no prospect of ever identifying the hand-writing. The letters, undoubtedly, come from an enemy of Monsieur d'Estelan."

"Or of mine. It matters little. It is not the man who has denounced him whom I wish to punish," said the count, and, looking fixedly at the detective, he added: "Have you ever served as a soldier?"

"Yes, sir, for seven years. I enlisted, and was about to be made an officer when I left the army to marry."

"Have you any children?"

"A son and a daughter."

"You will understand my feelings, then. I also have been a soldier, and I know but one way of getting out of a desperate situation. Monsieur d'Estelan is at this moment in the drawing-room which adjoins this apartment, but he cannot overhear what we are saying, and is not aware of what is going on. You need not fear that I shall suffer him to escape. Will you wait for me here while I speak with him; it will not take long."

As he spoke, M. de Maugars opened one of the drawers of a desk near by. He drew a revolver from it, and examined it to see whether it was loaded.

"What are you doing, sir?" said the detective, approaching him.

"You do not intend to kill your son-in-law."

"I thought that you understood my intentions," replied M. de Maugars. "I will explain myself more clearly. As you have been a soldier you must know what an officer does when he has dishonoured himself. He blows out his brains, does he not?"

The agent was about to protest against this comparison, but M. de Maugars resumed with increasing animation: "I have seen such things,

sir. I have seen one of my comrades, the favourite of the regiment, and perhaps the bravest man in it, blow out his brains to expiate a momentary weakness. He had gambled and lost a sum which he could not pay, and to rid himself of the debt, he had used the money intended for the pay of the squadron. We all pitied, but we all approved him. The matter was buried in his grave, and the First Regiment of the Chasseurs d'Afrique was not disgraced by having one of its captains court-martialed. Now, my regiment is my house, and I will suffer no stain upon my name."

"Your name is not brought into the matter," objected the agent.

"My daughter's name and mine are one."

"But if Monsieur d'Estelan killed himself, his suicide would be committed upon and explained, and the whole matter would, in the end, be known."

"No, not if you keep the secret—you, and those you serve; and you told me just now that if the culprit were dead the law would make no sign. I will undertake to silence malicious people."

"And do you think that Madame d'Estelan will approve of your condemning her husband to death."

"My daughter will be ignorant of all. She has been deceived as well as myself, and I have the right to rid her of a man who has abused our confidence. I made the match, and I shall unmake it."

"By forcing your son-in-law to kill himself?"

"I shall not force him. When he learns that you have come to arrest him he will feel that but one way remains of getting out of a frightful situation. I will give him this weapon, and he will do what I should do in his place."

"I doubt it."

"You judge him wrongly. I am sure, for my part, that he is not lost to all feelings of honour. I am sure that he is no coward."

"A man may not be a coward and yet recoil from suicide. If Monsieur d'Estelan is innocent he will cling to life in order to justify himself."

"Innocent! you do not believe him to be so!"

"I know nothing about it, but I know that I should fail in my duty if I allowed a man who is accused to escape from justice when it depends upon me to prevent him from doing so. I will not consent to what you ask."

"Is that your final decision?"

"Yes, sir, it is. I have my orders, and you who have been a soldier cannot be surprised if I obey them."

"Very well," answered the count, coldly, again examining the hammer of the revolver which he held, "I have but one course to pursue."

"What is that?"

"To kill myself."

"Kill yourself! You forget that you have a daughter."

"My daughter will be an orphan, as you will not allow her to be a widow. I shall not have the pain of reading my son-in-law's conviction in the newspapers, and you will have nothing to reproach yourself with."

The agent knew men. In carrying out his formidable yet delicate duties he had learned how to distinguish acting from truth. He saw that M. de Maugars was not playing a mock-tragic part, and that, in his exaggerated views as to honour, he was determined to end his life. The case was not one of those which occur in the usual course of a detective's duties, and the agent found himself placed in a most trying dilemma; but he was not destitute of feeling, and soon made up his mind. "Sir," said

he, in an agitated tone, "if I agree to allow you to see Monsieur d'Estelan alone, will you give me your word that you will not fire at him?"

"I will," replied the count, unhesitatingly.

"And you will not help him to escape?"

"I told you before that this house has but one door leading into the street, and your men are watching that door."

"There are windows."

"They are thirty feet above the ground."

The windows of the apartment were open. The agent had only to lean out to see that a leap from them was impossible at this height, and, moreover, he saw his men walking about in the street below.

"Besides," resumed M. de Maugars, "I should be going against my own aim if I favoured Monsieur d'Estelan's flight. He would be arrested sooner or later, and the affair would make all the more noise. It is better to end it at once."

"If Monsieur d'Estelan made up his mind, contrary to your ideas, to run the risk of a criminal suit, you agree to allow me to act. I will act, of course, with all the discretion and consideration that can be shown."

"I do not doubt it, sir, and I thank you. You can arrest this man without any interference on my part if he prefers dishonour to death. I will give him up myself, if need be, for he will deserve no pity. I ask but a quarter of an hour to talk with him. Is that too much?"

"No, but happen what may, I rely upon our present conversation remaining secret."

"I promise you that it shall, sir."

M. de Maugars now looked at the agent with an expression which stirred his soul to its very depths. "You are a worthy man," he said. "Let me take your hand."

The agent suffered him to do so. He was greatly troubled, but he still hoped to get out of the difficulty without compromising himself.

With that rapidity of thought which is derived by acquaintance with puzzling situations, he had thought over the pros and cons, and concluded that he did not run any great risk by authorising an interview between the father and the son-in-law. He did not believe in suicide upon a point of honour when the deed is one of years gone by, and he had no fear that M. d'Estelan would blow out his brains. But he was sure that the count would kill himself upon the spot if the favour he solicited were refused. And the agent said to himself: "I have his word. He will allow me to arrest my man, and that being done, he will reflect before lodging a ball in his own head. His daughter is not far off. She will reach the scene of action and persuade him to live. I shall have done my duty and a good action besides."

"Thank you," resumed M. de Maugars, after vigorously pressing the detective's hand. "But I have still a last service to ask of you."

"Speak, sir."

"If, when this unfortunate man has dealt justice upon himself, you report the suicide, as your duty obliges you to do, my servants won't understand why a police-officer should be at hand in my house at the very moment of the catastrophe, and they will guess that you came to arrest Monsieur d'Estelan."

"True; and that is one of the reasons why you ought to abandon your purpose."

"No, for what I dread will not occur, if you will second me. My

daughter is at the other end of this apartment, changing her dress. My servants have not yet returned, except the one whom I sent into the reception-room. He will not hear anything, and will not stir. You, on the contrary, will hear the pistol shot. You will come in, and when you see that Monsieur d'Estelan is dead, you must leave the house as though you had come here simply to talk with me on a matter of business. My footman does not know who you are; neither does the house porter. They will not pay any attention to you. A moment afterwards, I will send to the police station for an officer. You are not at that place, are you?"

"No, sir, I belong to the judicial service, but——"

"That is enough. Then the commissary will state in his declaration that my son-in-law killed himself accidentally, in handling a pistol, let us say, which was loaded unknown to him. My honour will be safe."

"But what shall I say to those who sent me here? No, no; I cannot promise you to carry my kindness so far as to——"

"Promise nothing, I am sure that you will not betray me," said M. de Maugars, suddenly opening the door leading into the drawing-room.

He quickly crossed the threshold and locked the door behind him without troubling himself about the officer, who was beginning to regret his own good nature, although he was convinced that Mademoiselle de Maugars' husband would refuse to obey the terrible ultimatum of his father-in-law.

As the count entered the drawing-room he saw M. d'Estelan, who came towards him, smiling, and with both hands extended.

"Back, sir!" said M. de Maugars, sternly. "I have come here to question you. Answer me!"

"What do you mean?" stammered the young man, in amazement.

"Your name is Louis Vallouris, and, ten years ago, you were employed as a clerk by a merchant at Marseilles."

"Didn't you know that? The name which I took when abroad is that of my mother's grandfather; you yourself desired that I should continue to bear it, although it did not figure on my marriage papers. I do not blush for mine, however, and if you wish——"

"That is not the question. You are accused of an infamous act."

"I!" exclaimed M. d'Estelan, who turned perceptibly pale.

"Yes, sir. In 1870, on the day before you left Marseilles, thirty-three thousand francs were stolen from the safe of the merchant who employed you. Will you undertake to say that you did not know it?"

"I do, most positively, and I refuse to believe it. Had a theft been committed on the day before my departure, I should have been suspected as being the culprit, and I should have been pursued."

"You were pursued. A warrant was issued against you, and a description of you was sent to all the police stations. But you had taken your precautions and were not caught. Where were you?"

"In Paris. The Germans were advancing by forced marches to besiege the city. It was eight days after the battle of Sedan. I wished to enlist. I thought it my duty to hasten where danger existed for the country, and I went."

"Without letting any one know?"

"I made up my mind very suddenly, and had not a moment to lose. The train which I took was the last to enter Paris. On the morrow all the railway lines were cut."

"That explains why the law failed to reach you, but it does not prove your innocence."

"You believe me to be guilty, then?"

"Prove that you are not so. What did you do during the siege?"

"I enlisted under the name of Estelan, in a battalion of sharp-shooters. I served all the time at the advance-posts. I fought at La Malmaison, at Champaigny, and at Buzeval. I did not spare myself at all."

"You tried to get killed. I can understand that. What became of you after the capitulation?"

"I saw the Commune beginning; I despaired of France, and I went to Havre to take passage for Mexico."

"You had some money, then?"

"Six thousand francs which remained of what my father had left me, and which I received from my guardian when I came of age. The surplus had been used to buy me off from military service, some months before the war and prior to the death of my guardian, who was—I believe that I have already told you—formerly a captain of a merchant vessel. Had he lived I should probably have remained at Marseilles."

"You assert, then, that you went abroad without knowing that the law was at your heels?"

"How should I have known it? I had not seen any of my old acquaintances. The idea that I was suspected of having robbed a safe could not have entered my head. I did not even know that my employer had a safe, for he was a small dealer who was not thought to be very well off. If he stood before me now he would be the first to declare the accusation to be absurd."

"He failed, and he is dead. You ought to have thought of him sooner," said Maugars, in an ironical tone. "You remained eight years in Mexico, and you have been back in France six months. You have had time to justify yourself. Now it is too late."

"Too late! I really seem to be dreaming, sir. Is it you who speak thus to me?—you who opened your doors to me, and encouraged hopes in which I scarcely dared indulge?—you who have done me the honour of bestowing your daughter's hand upon me?"

"I could not foresee that the man whom I accepted as a son-in-law would be arrested on the day of his wedding."

"What do you say?"

"The truth, sir. Just now, when I returned from church, I found a police-officer downstairs. He came to execute the orders he had received to secure your person. He is there in my private room, and, while you were awaiting me here, I had a conversation with him, which leaves no doubt as to the result of this affair. It would bring you before the assize court."

"Oh, this is too much!" exclaimed M. d'Estelan. "Bring in this agent, sir, and when he has heard me—— But no; I will go to him."

But the count intercepted his son-in-law, who was rushing towards the door. "You forget, sir," said he, in a hoarse tone, "you forget that an hour ago you became the husband of Mademoiselle de Maugars."

"It is for that reason that I wish to put an immediate end to these odious slanders."

"You cannot do so. The agent is not the man to understand your explanations, and decide the matter. He will arrest you, and I declare

to you that a man of honour, even when he is unjustly accused, ought not to allow himself to be taken to prison."

"What can he do, then?"

"He must die!" replied M. de Maugars, raising his revolver.

M. d'Estelan started, but did not flinch. "You wish to kill me. Do so, sir," said he, quietly.

"You are mistaken," replied the count, after a moment's silence. "I promised the officer who is there not to deal out justice upon you myself."

"Justice!" repeated the young man, scornfully.

"Besides," continued M. de Maugars, "if I killed you, I should be taken before the assize court, and my daughter would be as greatly disgraced as now, for no one would know why I killed you."

"Very well. I understand. You wish me to spare you this execution."

"You have guessed correctly. Take this weapon and blow out your brains, if you are not a coward."

Estelan sprang forward, but, succeeding in mastering the first impulse of his anger, he replied, unhesitatingly: "It is because I am not a coward that I shall not kill myself. To kill myself would be to confess myself guilty."

"And you prefer to discuss the question with the judges who will examine you, and to pay a lawyer for trying to convince them that you are not a thief? He may succeed, if he is skilful. The papers will publish his arguments and praise his eloquence. Oh, that would be a 'celebrated case!' A man belonging to good society is not to be found every day sitting in the dock where rascals are brought between two policemen; and if you are acquitted—you may be, for want of proof—you will become the hero of the day; all France will talk about you, and of me, and of my daughter. Have you thought of all that when you resolve to run the risks of a criminal suit? Have you asked yourself whether you have a right to ruin us in trying to save yourself?"

"You are cruel, sir; cruel and unjust. I might ask you whether you have the right to condemn me without hearing me? Death does not appall me. I saw it face to face during the siege of Paris, and at other times as well. But I will not die without confounding those who accuse me; it does not suit me to leave a stained name to a wife whom I love and respect."

"If you had respected her you would not have married her."

Once more did Louis d'Estelan start at the insult offered to him, and he was obliged to make a great effort not to forget that the man who thus addressed him was Madeleine's father.

"You oblige me, sir," said he, slowly, "to remind you that I did not try to bring about this marriage, although I so much desired it. I came to Paris unknown, and had no connection with any one here. Chance threw me in your way at a gentleman's house, where I had been kindly received owing to the recommendation of one of our consuls in Mexico. I had no title, and was not even of good social standing; the name I bore did not legally belong to me, and the money which I had made was the result of efforts in business life. You received me, however, with a welcome which deeply touched me; you introduced me to your daughter, and I admired her good qualities, which impressed me even more than her beauty. This, however, did not give me courage to declare myself, and if your relative, the Marchioness de Puygarrault, had not given me to understand that I

should be accepted, I should never have taken such a step, in the success of which I did not believe. I took it, however, after the marchioness had spoken to me, and you did me the honour of accepting my offer. I appeal to your frankness now. Did I deceive you as to my present position, my antecedents, or my family? Did I conceal from you that I was born poor, of obscure parents, that my name was simply Louis Vallouris, and that I had only taken that of Estelan on going abroad? Did I not tell you that I had begun by being a merchant's clerk?"

" You told me all, except that you had committed a theft."

" What you are doing, sir, is most unworthy! You insult me, and you know that I cannot make you give me satisfaction for your insults. A son-in-law cannot fight with his wife's father."

The count turned pale with anger. The martial blood which still boiled in his veins as in the days of his youth prompted him to demand a settlement of the quarrel by the sword, so as to prove to M. d'Estelan that all fathers-in-law do not look upon their social obligations in the same way. He controlled himself, however, with a great effort, and returned to the terrible necessities of the moment. " Time is flying, sir," said he, " and the police officer allowed me but a quarter of an hour. I beg of you to decide at once. If you shrink from the means which I offer you of saving our honour, the honour of us all, you will be taken to Mazas and sent to Marseilles, where you will be tried. You are free to do so. I have given my word that I will not kill you, but I shall kill myself; and my daughter, whom you pretend to love, will die of shame and grief. If you have the courage to put an end to your life, no one will know that you have been accused. I have inquired as to all this. The officer has promised secrecy. He will certify that your death was accidental, and you will leave an unstained name to Madeleine. Choose now," concluded M. de Maugars.

Louis d'Estelan changed countenance, but it was not fear that contracted his features. He drew back, and, leaning against the sill of an open window, he began to look fixedly at the count, who bore his gaze unflinchingly.

The scene would have tempted an artist: these two men, face to face, alike angry and proud, the older one summoning the younger to death, and, at the back of the picture, the trees of a garden full of shade and chirping birds. On the one side the room overlooked the Place de la Trinité, and on the other this solitary garden which belonged to a neighbouring house.

The silence was so profound in the apartment in which this drama was being enacted that the steps of the officer who was restlessly pacing up and down in the count's private room were distinctly audible. They drew near at last and a knock was heard at the door.

" Do you hear?" asked M. de Maugars. " He is becoming impatient. The quarter of an hour is over."

" You say," said Madeleine's husband, coming slowly forward, " that if I don't consent to kill myself with this weapon you will turn it against yourself."

" I do. If you wish to live I must die, and I will not wait to die until you are arrested."

" Give me the revolver."

The count turned pale, but he offered the weapon to Louis d'Estelan, and his hand did not tremble as he gave it to him. The old soldier was a man of iron. " That is well," muttered he, " I forgive you now." And,

turning towards the door of the private room, he seized hold of the key which was in the lock.

"Farewell!" said Estelan's voice. "If we see each other no more in this world you must tell Madeleine that I am innocent."

"Open the door!" called out the detective.

M. de Maugars turned the key, the door opened, and the officer almost upset the count as he hurried into the drawing-room. "Where is your son-in-law?" he asked, angrily. "He has escaped; you have deceived me, sir!"

The count had turned away in order to avoid seeing the frightful end of this tragedy. He had thought that the shot would go off just as he opened the door. But on hearing the officer's exclamation he turned round. His son-in-law was no longer there. He understood what had happened, and hastened to the window.

"Look!" he exclaimed.

Louis Vallouris was lying with his face downward upon the grass in the garden below. He still held the revolver in his clenched hand, but he did not stir, and the grass around him was reddened with his blood.

"You see that he is dead," said M. de Maugars, in a hoarse voice.

"He attempted to fly," said the officer, in a low tone.

"No. He did not wish to kill himself in this room, where I am expecting my daughter every moment."

"Your daughter! True! she may come, and my presence here will—"

"May I rely upon your abstaining from making any statement as to the suicide?" interrupted the count.

"I—yes—I hope that the commissary, who will be sent for, will be willing to make such a statement as you desire. I am going to see him, but I am obliged to protect myself, and I shall tell him the truth."

"I rely upon you, sir, and if I am ever able to prove my gratitude, I swear to you that I——"

The count did not finish. A door at the opposite end of the drawing-room suddenly opened, and Madeleine de Maugars appeared. She had just taken off her wedding dress, and wore an elegant walking costume. She looked all smiles.

"You are alone, father!" she said, gaily. "Where is Louis? I thought that he was waiting for me here."

Then as she ran towards M. de Maugars to give him a kiss, she caught sight of the serious-looking man who was standing at the window, and turned as red as a rose.

"Excuse me, sir," she stammered, "I did not see you before."

The count stopped her with a gesture, and went straight up to the officer. "Go, sir," said he, in a low tone, "I place my honour, and that of this unhappy girl in your hands."

The detective was very much agitated, but he nodded in sign of assent, bowed to Madeleine, and then withdrew.

"What is the matter? Who is this gentleman?" asked Madeleine, anxiously. And, as her father did not reply, she added: "But on a wedding-day nothing ever goes wrong," and she smiled as she spoke. "Louis must be in your room, of course. Did he tell you that we were going out shopping together, just as though we had been keeping house for a year? That was a charming idea of his. And we are fortunate to have such a fine day for our first walk. See!" added poor Madeleine,

going towards the window, "the sky is blue, the air is mild, the birds are singing—"

M. de Maugars placed himself in front of her.

"Don't look down there," he said in a choking voice.

"Why not?—you frighten me!"

"Come away, I tell you! There has been a horrible accident."

"My husband!"

"Just now he was talking to me, and leaning against the railing of this balcony. It is very low down,—his foot slipped on the floor, and—"

"He fell?" cried Madeline, wildly. "He is hurt, perhaps seriously, and you stay here when he is in need of help! Let me go! Let us hasten to him!"

"It is too late. You are a widow."

The young girl tottered, and losing consciousness, fell in her father's arms. M. de Mangars at once carried her to her own room.

The detective was already in the street. He had left without saying anything whatever to the footman in the ante-room, who on his side took no notice of the unknown visitor's abrupt departure. Finding his men upon the pavement outside, the detective ordered them to follow him, and then hastened to the district commissary of police to explain the matter to him, and to ask him to take his place. He did not tell him all, but the commissary understood the situation. M. d'Estelan was dead, and the prefect of police had recommended quiet measures. The only thing to be done now was to record an "accidental death," without mentioning anything of what had previously occurred.

"I will go to the house," said he. "As your men are below, I will take them with me. When everything is settled, I will go to the prefecture. This Monsieur de Maugars may consider himself a lucky man. He has rid himself without any scandal of a son-in-law accused of theft, and he has met with good fellows, like you and me, who will keep his secret. Such things only happen to lucky folks."

"That is but relative happiness," said the detective; "however, no fault will be found with us."

Ten minutes afterwards the commissary was talking with the doorkeeper of the house where M. de Maugars lived, stating that a neighbour had informed him that some one had been killed by falling from a window into the garden, and bidding him take him there, so that he might draw up a report of the death and have the body removed.

The doorkeeper, greatly surprised, assured the commissary that he had heard nothing whatever of the matter, and that, besides, the garden belonged to the next house, which could only be entered from the Rue de la Chausée d'Antin.

On hearing this the commissary began to feel somewhat uneasy, and hastened to the Rue de la Chausée d'Antin with the men who were waiting for him outside. The doorkeeper there did not know anything more of the matter than his colleague, but he immediately took the commissary to the scene of the accident.

It was an enclosure planted with old trees, a neglected spot, where the grass grew as it listed, and where any one might enter—one of those forgotten corners of old Paris—islets of verdure which the rising tide of building enterprise will soon submerge. The windows of M. de Maugars' drawing-room had remained open, and traces of blood marked the spot where Louis d'Estelan had fallen, but his body was no longer there.

The dead do not arise, and if M. d'Estelan had disappeared, it must be that the fall had failed to kill him. Stunned at first by the violence of the shock, he had gradually recovered himself, and had found the strength to rise and reach the street. He must already be far away. It was a miracle, but there was no other means of accounting for his disappearance.

When the doorkeeper was closely questioned he swore that he had not seen any one go out, but he confessed that he was asleep in his room, and so the commissary no longer doubted but what a miracle had taken place.

"Well," muttered he "a police officer learns something new every day of his life. Trust people about to be arrested and second-floor windows after this! Fortunately, the gentleman will not be hard to find. But, never mind, my fellow officer has done a bad job, and I am sorry to be mixed up in it, for heaven knows what they will say at the prefecture."

II.

THAT evening—the evening of the day on which Madeleine had been married at La Trinité—while hot tears were being shed at M. de Maugars' house, there was dancing at the Jardin Mabille—a great ball in fact, a "night festival," so the posters said, and the garden was lighted brilliantly everywhere. The zinc palm-trees bore sparkling girandoles instead of dates upon their spreading branches, and amid the flower-beds innumerable small lamps shone like glow-worms.

People were coming out of the Champs Elysées Circus. It was the hour when the battalion of fashionable irregulars repaired in close columns to the drill-ground, where they marched round in a circle as if they were practising in a riding-school. They turned at Mabille at night time as they turned around the lakes of the Bois de Boulogne in the afternoon. It was the hour, too, when the *habitues* of Mabille took up their position on chairs facing the covered dancing gallery, set aside for wet evenings, at a point where the circular walk branched off from the main avenue. Just like the stand at Longchamps where the President of the Republic sits on review days, this was the best place for watching the march past. There, under the eyes of the staff of "fast liver," young and old, all the noteworthy Parisian irregulars passed by, alone or in platoons.

During the season Busserolles came every evening to this particular point. He had a winter and a summer programme. His amusements were regulated like clockwork. He had a horror of the unexpected, and pretended to do everything with the utmost regularity.

Bautru was not so assuming. He was far more imaginative and liked to trust to chance for his amusement. He did not think himself called upon to leave Paris in July, and to go every night to Mabille, from Easter till the opening of the season at Trouville. And, on this particular evening, he was not in the least disposed to appreciate the charm of sitting under a number of gas-lighted trees, and still less to stand looking at circus-riders. Madeleine's marriage had made him melancholy, and he longed for some great excitement to drive away the bitter remembrances of the morning. The afternoon had passed away gloomily enough. He had fenced till four, played with dice at a franc a throw from four to seven, and had then dined dismally at the club from seven to nine. After which, for want of a heavy game at which to lose his money, he had gone to the Champs Elysées to drive off his dulness. He had met his friend

Busserolles there, and for want of anything better he had reluctantly agreed to accompany him to the "night-festival."

Reaching Mabille just as most of the crowd was pouring in, they found a convenient spot and soon became the centre of an animated group, thanks to Busserolles' manœuvres for getting together a party of gay fellows. They had increased to five or six, and were seated in a circle, talking at random. Alfred Girac, a good-looking dandy, much liked by the women, was there among them, with Jules de Rangouze, called the "naughty peasant," a native of Provence, who had only been in Paris for seven years or so, and who was lucky at cards and a clever flirt. There was also a lady whom one of the party was escorting, and who appeared to be acquainted with all of the set.

"Tell me, Rosine," said Girac to her, "has Antonia really returned from Holland?"

"Yes," said Busserolles, replying in Rosine's place, "and she is living in great style. Her rooms in the Avenue de Messine are full of works of art. I called upon her after going to Mademoiselle de Maugars' wedding; she has some rare bits of furniture in her reception-room, and—"

"Speaking of the Maugars' wedding," interrupted Girac, "Frédoc told me that Antonia was at the mass, on the side where the bridegroom's friends sat."

"She went to see the dresses."

"And to show her own," said Rosine.

"Who is this Estelan who married Mademoiselle de Maugars?" asked Rangouze.

"You ought to be able to tell us all that," replied Girac. "You must know all about the nobility of Provence, as you belong to it yourself."

"I never heard of that name," replied M. de Rangouze, somewhat confused. He did not like conversations which brought up the question of his nobility, which was little believed in by those who knew him.

"Did you never meet Estelan, then?"

"Never. I do not visit the Count de Maugars."

"And Estelan goes nowhere. So that accounts for everything. But this new-comer is a strange man. He has married a charming girl, and his honeymoon is just rising in the firmament."

"Let him beware of the dark side," said Rangouze, laughing stupidly.

"Gentlemen," said Bautur, "let us change the subject. I did not come to Mabille to hear matrimony discussed."

"The fact is, that it is not a gay topic," said Rosine, "especially to you, my dear Guy, for you had a narrow escape, it appears. You went to Maugars' house a great deal, and you might have married the adorable Madeleine yourself if you had liked."

"I never thought of it! Do I look like a man running after a woman's dowry? Suppose we talk about Antonia?"

"I should like to know why she is called the 'Grasshopper,' remarked Rangouze.

"Did you never read La Fontaine's fable?—

"Having spent all summer long
In one merry dance and song,
When the wintry breezes blew,
She was puzzled what to do."

"But the wintry blasts do not seem to have troubled her, as she is rolling in wealth."

"The wind may change. Besides, there is her mother."

"Her mother? What of that?"

"The widow Moucheron will ruin her yet. She is an old card-player, and is always running after an infallible 'martingale.' Antonia believes in it, and so all her money goes to Monaco."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Busserolles, "would you like to see something new?"

"New? Here? That's impossible! I have been walking up and down here for the last seven years and the women are always the same," muttered Rangonze.

"Look over there, at the end of the path, and see those three gentlemen with white ties. Three lawyers coming along, three lawyers, if you please, and one of them is Pruncvanx, the notary!"

"'Vaux who advances, Vaux who advances!'" said Girac, humming an air from the "*Belle Hélène*."

"It is really he!" remarked Rosine in a whisper. "I am glad that I saw the sight."

"Do you know him?"

"Pruneaux? I should think I did! Whenever I have any money to deposit, I take it to him. I am the 'Ant,' not the 'Grasshopper,' and I hope to end my days in the country. Whenever you have a pretty chateau to sell, my dear Guy, at a low price——"

"All this does not explain the presence of three legal functionaries in this place," interrupted Busserolles, "and with white ties, too, which is an aggravating circumstance."

"It is simple and easy enough to guess why they are here," replied Girac; "they have been eating heartily, drinking as well, and have taken the door of Mabille for that of a court-room."

Girac was only half mistaken, for Pruneaux and his companions were dressed for a ceremonious dinner, and seemed to be very gay. Pruneaux's face, especially, was radiant. Stout, short, and florid, like one of the natives of Flanders depicted in Rubens' "*Kermesse*," this Parisian notary was a lively companion in his merry moments. He looked up pleasantly when he saw Guy de Bautru, and was about to speak to him, when, catching sight of Rosine, who sat somewhat back, he preferred to pass on.

"He is vexed at being seen by one of his clients when he is playing the truant schoolboy," said Girac, laughing.

"More vexed than you think," muttered Rosine, in reply.

"Here you are, all of you!" exclaimed a young man who had been walking behind the lawyers, and who now suddenly found himself in front of the group. He was tall, and somewhat slovenly in his attire.

"Why, here's Métél!" exclaimed Busserolles and his friends in a breath.

"Good evening, Métél," said Rosine. "Are you quite well, my lad? What did you come here for? To hear the news? Why are you not busy with your newspaper?"

"I have just left the office, and as for news, I have enough for to-night."

The new-comer was on the staff of a newspaper with a good circulation, and as he had special charge of Parisian news he knew the persons of both sexes in the gay world. The women petted him in order to be favorably mentioned, and the men liked him on account of his good humour, and the information with which he was always liberally supplied. He went everywhere, and people talked all the more freely with him as he was known to be discreet whenever occasion required it.

Intelligent and active, although as dissipated as any one of those about him, Gustave Métel had, like Panurge, sixty-three ways of making money and two hundred and fourteen ways of spending it. But as he was honest and polite, Guy de Bautru, who did not like journalists as a rule, liked him very well.

"I am charmed to meet you," said the pressman. "I have something to show you, and wish to ask your advice."

"Do so, my dear fellow," replied Guy, somewhat surprised.

"Will you go round the garden with me?"

"It is a secret, then," said Rosine.

"It is not a secret," replied the journalist, "but as it is a matter which only interests Monsieur de Bautru—"

"Mysteries! You are growing alarming."

"Don't be vexed, Rosinette; I'll tell you all the theatrical news presently, and there's plenty of it to tell."

"I will go with you, Métel," said Bautru, rising.

The chatting which had been going on for the last twenty minutes did not entertain him at all, and he was glad to get away and talk of something else.

"So you are going to desert us!" exclaimed Busserolles. "I suppose that we shan't see you again to-night."

"Yes, you will, at the club. For once in a way there will be a game worth playing. There was a Brazilian admitted last night, who plays for high stakes."

"That is a good reason for keeping away, but we shall sup together, Rosine, Girac, Rangouze and I, at one o'clock at the Café Anglais. If you don't come to us there, I shall consider that you are a deserter."

"I don't promise," called out Bantru, who was already some distance off.

Métel had slipped his arm under Guy's and was leading him towards the circular walk, where there was a crowd of people admiring the most noted dancers. The journalist, who had lynx-like eyes, immediately discovered Pruneaux and his two friends in the first row of spectators. They all seemed to be vastly pleased with the feats of an ugly, imp-like woman, who was dancing on one foot and holding up the other.

"Isn't that Silenus, Monsieur de Maugars' notary?" asked Métel.

"Yes," said Guy, "let us go further off. If he sees us it will vex him. Besides, we can talk more freely down there. What have you to tell me?"

"It is something which concerns Monsieur de Maugars. You know him very well, don't you?"

"Very well is not the word. But I have an uncle who is very intimate with him, and who was still more so when he lived in Paris."

"You were at the wedding at La Trinité, to-day?"

"Yes, Busserolles was there with me."

"I had rather ask you what I wish to know than ask him. Did you go to Monsieur de Maugars' house after the ceremony?"

"No. I was only asked to the church."

"Then you know nothing of what occurred there?"

"Nothing whatever. What was it?"

"My dear fellow, oblige me by reading this strange letter, and tell me what you think of it."

As he spoke, Métel took a note-book from his pocket, drew a folded paper from between the leaves, and handed it to Bautru.

"Is this letter for me?" asked Guy, in surprise.

"No, but it will interest you. Read it, pray. But let us get away from the crowd. There is a bench in that corner, and we shall be able to make up our minds at ease about this strange paper."

Guy allowed himself to be taken towards some seats which were so placed as to give a view of the circular walk. It was difficult to get room on them when the dancing stopped, but each time the music struck up afresh the wild and eccentric maze drew the crowd away from them, and at that moment no one was there. The people who had been lounging about now stood among the group around the light-footed princesses, who were flourishing their shoes in the air and knocking off the hats of the lookers-on.

"Read, my dear fellow," said Métel, "and give me your opinion about it."

Bautru, more and more puzzled, unfolded the paper, and read its contents in a low tone, as is habitual when one peruses a document upon which an opinion is asked.

The document ran as follows:—"A great scandal has just occurred in a most aristocratical circle. After a brilliant wedding, which took place this morning at a church in the Chausée d'Antin, a most extraordinary event took place. The bridegroom, a gentleman who has not been long in Paris, was arrested as he was going with his wife to the house of his father-in-law, Count de M——, and taken to the police-station.

"This bridegroom, who bore an assumed name, had been long looked for by the police, and it was only yesterday that his identity was discovered, too late, unfortunately, for the honourable family with which he has allied himself. He was arrested on a charge of theft committed several years ago. The affair is in the hands of the legal authorities, and it is thought that the prisoner will soon be tried at the assizes."

"Well?" asked Bautru, who had not yet guessed the meaning of the paper.

"What!" exclaimed Métel, "can't you see that this refers to Monsieur de Maugars' son-in-law?"

"Don't say such a thing! It is perfectly absurd! Besides, I was at La Trinité, and I remained there until the last moment. No one was arrested, I can assure you of that."

"Not in the church, but after the ceremony. How do you know what happened then? You told me just now that you did not go to the count's house."

"You believe this ridiculous story, then?"

"I believe it, and yet I don't. I am a newspaper man, and it is my business to find out the truth."

"This letter was sent to your office, I suppose?"

"Yes. It was thrown into the letter-box there, and I was greatly surprised when I read it, for I at once thought that it alluded to the Maugars. I had just handed in a paragragh about Monsieur d'Estelan's marriage, which was nicely written, and in which I described the dresses and gave the names of the fashionable people present. Your name was there, my dear fellow. But now, I have my trouble for my pains. My head-man has laid the 'par.' aside for further orders, and I am afraid that it will never see the light."

"I was never more surprised in my life. Does a reliable paper like yours pay any attention to an anonymous denunciation? I didn't know

that it was enough to invent a spiteful lie and send it to you to ensure its publication."

"Excuse me, my dear sir," said Métel, somewhat annoyed, "we have as yet published nothing at all, and we shall not do so till we know more. We receive such letters every day, and we only use them when we are sure of the truth."

"You ought to burn them all."

"Not till we know whether they state the truth or the contrary. Remember that we run between two rocks. If we publish them, we may bring a lawsuit upon ourselves. If we don't insert them, we run the risk of missing important information, which the public require of our paper."

"And when you are in doubt, you—"

"We inquire; and I assure you that in this particular affair I have been very cautious. Knowing that you were very intimate with Monsieur de Maugars I decided to consult you."

"What the deuce can I tell you about it? This letter is utterly senseless, and this is what ought to be done with it," said Bautru, and as he spoke he crumpled the paper in his hand, as if he meant to throw it away.

"As you like, my dear friend! I don't care to deposit it among our archives, and I don't care whether you destroy it or not; but if I were in your place, I would put it in my pocket. It has undoubtedly come from some enemy of Monsieur de Maugars, and if you take any interest in him you would do him a good service by showing it to him. He will be glad to know who has stabbed him in the back."

"You are right," said Bautru, after a moment's reflection. "I will keep it, although I really attach very little importance to it. This odious statement is the work of some madman, or a malicious busybody. Who will believe that Monsieur d'Estelan is a thief? He has been for six months in Paris, he married openly before all men's eyes, and now it is asserted that he has committed a crime, and this is set forth on the very day of his marriage! Such things are only to be found in novels."

"Truth is often stranger than fiction; and I can quote instances of that. It was but lately that I read of a trial which—"

"Besides," interrupted Bautru, who had put the letter in his pocket, "this busybody's story is one that cannot be believed. I was there; I saw the married couple get out of their brougham in front of the Count de Maugars' house, on the Place de la Trinité, and I assure you that there were no policemen at their heels. Ask Busserolles what he thinks of this story, and, meantime, ask a sensible man who was at the ceremony and is now coming this way."

"Monsieur Frédoc? Would you mention this matter to him?"

"Why not? If it is true, all Paris will know it by to-morrow; if it is false, as I believe it to be, I may as well laugh at it with him. You will see that he will laugh at you for noticing it at all."

Bautru now rose and went to meet the gentleman whose name he had just mentioned. He was less certain than he professed to be of the absurdity of the strange information brought by the journalist. He did not exactly believe it, but it touched a tender spot. Madeleine de Maugars' husband was a man whom he did not like, and he did not care what happened to him. On the other hand, he was certainly sorry that the name of his uncle's intimate friend should be tarnished by M. d'Estelan's disgrace. And he wished to lay the strange case before a man whose opinion seemed to him of more value than that of Gustave Métel.

M. Frédoc was a member of the club to which Guy himself belonged. He had one good quality seldom found in men over sixty, he liked young people; he liked to talk with them, and his frankness, liveliness, and indulgent views pleased them. He only played whist, yet he pitied those who lost theirall at baccarat. He would even lend them money, and more than once a generously-offered loan had prevented them from being posted at the club for not having paid their liabilities within forty-eight hours. He had given up love-affairs, and still he knew how to console ill-treated lovers. He knew, besides, how to take good care of the comfortable fortune which he was fortunate enough to possess.

This phoenix of sexagenarians was of upright figure, with a graceful gait as well as a very pleasing countenance, bright eyes, perfect teeth, and hair that was scarcely silvered. He dressed well, equally avoiding a youthful style and the antiquated appearance of some old fogey. This evening, in particular, he did not look more than forty-five, and he seemed very contented indeed. He was smoking a cigar, which must have been a good one, to judge from the look of complacency with which he whiffed at it. He was switching at the bushes with his cane as he went along, and any one looking at him would have taken this to be a sign of inward satisfaction. As soon as he saw Bautru he walked up to him and held out his hand.

"I knew very well that I should meet you here, my dear Guy," he said, in a gay tone. "I came here at nine. You will laugh, but I think the orchestra excellent, and I am very fond of music in the open air. I only come to Mabille to hear the waltzes played. Such is the consequence of having been born in the days of Louis XVIII. Good evening, Monsieur Métel; how does your paper succeed?"

"We sell more every day, and I don't know where we shall stop."

"So much the worse!" replied Bautru. "I hate newspapers; they are nothing but vehicles for foolish stories. I will give you proof of this, Frédoc, and you will see that I am right. You were at Mademoiselle de Maugars' wedding this morning?"

"Yes; although I don't know either the count or his son-in-law. I am somewhat acquainted with the Neufgermains, who know them both; but I don't know why they took it into their heads to send me an invitation. I went from politeness, and I confess that I slipped off before the ceremony was over."

"I saw you go out. I was behind you. But you will never guess what Métel has been telling me. A letter has been sent to his paper to tell him that after the mass Monsieur d'Estelan was arrested for theft."

"That is very unlikely; but Monsieur Métel is no novice in newspaper work, and I suppose that he was not taken in by so coarse a fabrication. I admit that he might, at the most, make some inquiries."

"I did not fail to do so."

"What! exclaimed Bautru. "Did you, indeed? You did not tell me that."

"You did not let me finish my story."

"Your reporters, then—"

"My reporters went to Monsieur de Maugars' house, and to the prefecture of police."

"You fairly stun me!"

"It was necessary to know the facts," opined Frédoc, in a low tone.

"That is true. You understand what journalism is."

"And you learned, of course, that the whole thing was a mystification?" resumed Frédoc.

"Yes and no. That is just where the matter becomes complicated. At the prefecture my reporter was told that no one had been arrested. He tried to obtain other information, but did not succeed. The other reporter spoke to the doorkeeper at Monsieur de Maugars' house. Oh! don't be angry, my dear Bautru, he is a well-bred young man. Without naming Monsieur d'Estelan he inquired if anything had happened in the house. The porter told him that nothing had occurred, but that there had been a report in the neighbourhood that a man had committed suicide by jumping out of a window overlooking the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. With this uncertain information my reporter, like an intelligent envoy as he is, began to make some inquiries at the adjoining houses, and learned some strange things."

"What did he learn? You tell the story so well that you really arouse my interest, although, as a rule, I never read these kind of things," said Frédoc.

"Well, then, there was not a suicide exactly, but an attempt at one. A gentleman leaped from the third or fourth floor into a garden next to the house where Monsieur de Maugars lives."

"His rooms are on the second floor," interrupted Bautru.

"It is not certain from which floor the fall took place. But what is certain is that a commissary came with some policemen to remove the body."

"He found it, then? The man was dead?" asked Frédoc.

"Not at all. He had got up and walked off without any one seeing him. No one had witnessed the terrible leap. But the fact was indisputable, for traces of blood were found. The man must be a tough subject."

"But who was this man?" inquired Frédoc.

"No one knows. The reporter asked everybody, but in vain. It was an anonymous suicide, like the letter which was sent to us. I did something more. I sent to the prefecture again, and my ambassador was rather rudely received there. He was told that no one knew anything about the matter, and then he was sent about his business."

"And that is all!" exclaimed Guy.

"But it seems to me that it is something. If any one went, as the letter declares, to arrest Monsieur d'Estelan he may have leaped from the window either for the purpose of killing himself, or in order to escape, and having failed to break his neck—which is a miracle—he may have decided to make off."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Bautru, "what an imagination you have, my dear fellow! Your *scenario* is perfectly combined, but I hope that you are not going to have it brought out—that is, to print it in your paper."

"What do you take my paper for? We shall wait. To-morrow's issue won't contain a word on the subject. But in the course of the day the truth will come out, and if it prove true that Monsieur d'Estelan has disappeared, we shall be obliged to speak of it, under penalty of coming up last in the race for 'information,' for our contemporaries are not so discreet as we are."

"That seems to be a good plan," muttered Frédoc.

"I am not afraid that you will do anything of the kind," said Guy, shrugging his shoulders. "By to-morrow, my dear Métel, you will find out that some one has been making game of you, and this stupid falsehood will go no further."

"So be it!" concluded the journalist. "I should be very sorry to have to say anything disagreeable in reference to your friends, and it was to let you know about all this that I came to Mabille. Now, gentlemen, I am going to leave you! I must be at the office to look over some proofs, and to find out if there is anything more about this matter."

Bautru did not attempt to detain Métel. He could not find fault with his confidential communication, but it had annoyed him, and he was not sorry to end the conversation.

As the sagacious Frédoc was not intimate with the Count de Maugars, it might be supposed that he would have taken less interest in the story than Guy, but it appeared to be before his mind, for he said, with an anxious look: "What this gentleman has told us is almost alarming. I don't believe it; but if it be true, the situation in which Mademoiselle de Maugars will find herself is frightful. What a lot, to have married a thief without knowing it, when she might have—" Frédoc hesitated, and then added: "Was there not some talk of your marrying her yourself, last year, my dear Guy? Excuse my freedom! I question you as if I had a right to do so, and it is a great liberty; but you know how much I like you, and I hope that you won't take exception to what I say—it is entirely due to the interest I feel in you."

"Oh, I am not angry," replied Bautru, with a forced laugh. "You are my friend, though older than I, and I have no secrets to hide from you. I admit that I had some thoughts of asking for Mademoiselle de Maugars' hand. But the idea passed away, for I thought that her father would not approve of me as a suitor, and as I did not wish to expose myself to being rejected, I made no offer."

"I can understand that, but I cannot understand how Monsieur de Maugars accepted, as his son-in-law, a man whom he knew very little about."

"You speak now as if you really believed the story which Métel told us."

"Not exactly; but 'there's no smoke without a fire,' says the proverb, and something strange must have occurred to-day at Monsieur de Maugars' house. A suicide or an accident, perhaps. Do you know that if his daughter were a widow she would have no end of suitors."

"I wish that she may, for I shan't be among them, even if she had a hundred times as many good qualities as she has, and I admit that she has several. I shouldn't care to follow after Monsieur d'Estelan."

"It would, indeed, be an unpleasant thought. If that gentleman jumped out of the window on his wedding-day, everybody will believe that he did so to avoid disgrace, for the story which was sent to the papers will get about. Those who believed, or invented it, won't keep it to themselves. The respect in which Monsieur de Maugars is held will be greatly diminished, and you would be wrong to enter such an unlucky family. But, thank heaven, all our suppositions are without foundation, and the subject is not a pleasant one. You came here to amuse yourself, and I am going to leave you free to do so. It is past eleven, and I am expected at the club. There are only three of us who play two-franc whist with a dummy, and when one is away the others are vexed. Shall I see you again to-night?"

"Perhaps; Busserolles is getting together a party for supper, and wants to take me with him. But I have not made up my mind to go. I should like to play a heavy game. I feel dull, and I shall be glad to rouse myself a little."

"Take care, my dear friend! Such rousing may carry you too far. In your place, I should prefer the supper. You cannot get wine for nothing at the Café Anglais, but baccarat is still dearer."

"When a man's unlucky; but I imagine that I shan't be. There now! We have run up against Pruneaux and his lawyers. Let us try to avoid them."

"Pruneaux!" exclaimed Frédoc. "True enough, it's he! I didn't expect to meet him here, and he is a fool to have come."

On leaving Gustave Métel, the two friends had joined the crowd which was walking around the circular space set aside for dancing; and, chatting as they walked, they had reached the café, where people were now refreshing themselves. The three white ties were seated at a table in front, and were creating quite a sensation among the promenaders.

"The fact is," replied Bautru, "that he had better had stayed in his office. But as I am not called upon to remind him of what a notary's behaviour should be, I shall leave him to his fate."

"I will undertake to lecture him and see him home," said Frédoc, at once. "He is the most irreproachable notary in the world, but he prides himself upon his bachelor ways. He will get into trouble if I don't take care of him. He is one of my old friends, and has been managing my affairs for the last ten years, and I care more for his reputation than I do for my own."

"You had better take care of him, then."

"I will! I will leave you now, my dear friend, and fly to Pruneaux's rescue."

Frédoc did as he said, and Bautru went his way. He was thinking how he could best slip past the place where his friend Busserolles was hidden. Guy longed to be alone, for what had been said by the journalist still troubled him greatly.

But at this moment Antonia, the so-called "Grasshopper," saw him and hastened towards him. She wore a dress of heliotrope satin, cut in the Japanese style, and displayed a great many diamonds. She was a tall, rather pretty woman, although somewhat too thin; however, her eyes were very large and bright, and her perfect teeth were extremely white.

"Ah, there you are, my Guy-Guy!" she exclaimed, stopping Bautru, who tried to avoid her. "You never come to see me now? Are you going to be married? No, of course not. You only go to see other people married. That is better. I saw you this morning at La Trinité. The bride is stunningly pretty. They said last season that you were going to marry her. If you have let any one else have her, it is because you have made up your mind to stay single. You will come to supper, won't you?"

"Perhaps. It will depend upon——"

"Upon yourself; well, if you desert us I shall cut you when I next see you. That will vex you to death. But you must come. We shall have a gay time, and I shall bring Zélie with me. By-the-bye, let me introduce you."

Zélie, who was a sly-looking blonde, honoured Bautru with a bow and an appreciative glance. She looked at him just as she would have looked at a bit of furniture in an auction room. This young person was Antonia's companion, and fulfilled that office with exemplary wisdom and reserve. Her dress was simple, her jewellery sparse, and her manner very dignified.

"Yes, my dear," resumed the tireless "Grasshopper." "Zélie and I are always together. Without her I should be wearied to death, for I should be always alone. My mother is at Monaco."

"What! In June?"

"Oh, she doesn't mind the sun when she wins at cards, and it seems that her last martingale is a success."

"I hope that she will break the bank; but I must leave you now," replied Bautru, executing a skilful turn, in order to get rid of the lady's chatter.

To avoid being accosted again, he took a circuitous turn in view of leaving the ball, which did not amuse him in the least. He thought of going slowly along the Champs Elysées, to give himself time to think over the anonymous letter. He could not help wondering what it meant, and, despite all that he had said to Frédoc, the accursed epistle lingered in his mind, and his imagination ran riot regarding it. Strange presentiments were mingled with his thoughts, and he conjectured that he might be mixed up in the matter in spite of himself. He recapitulated many recollections of the past, reviewing the already distant days when Madeleine de Maugars blushed when she talked with him, when her image was always before his mind, and he said to himself that if Madeleine were free, the broken chain might be again united.

This prospect at first seemed more dangerous than blissful; but he gradually became aware that the fires of love were but smouldering, and he feared that the flames might burst forth unexpectedly. He mistrusted his own heart, and endeavoured to control its impulses. He vainly tried to seem indifferent, and to think that the Maugars' misfortunes did not affect him, that the true science of life implied a great deal of philosophy and a little egotism; nothing succeeded. He could not dismiss the ideas which annoyed him, nor even get rid of them for a single moment. And, as he was obliged to wait until the morrow to know more, he wished to make the hours fly swiftly until the daylight. The supper tempted him but little. He was well acquainted with the people who were invited, and knew what they amounted to, and felt no interest whatever either in the women or in their escorts. There are books which one feels no desire to read; others which, once read, one never wishes to open again.

The most insignificant game at baccarat offered more attractions to Guy than the supper. Cards were what tempted him most, and, in the frame of mind in which he now found himself, he was ready for desperate remedies. He resolved to go at once to his club, and remain there till morning; and, with this laudable intention, he went towards the garden entrance along several winding paths. Suddenly, however, he espied two women who were going the same way as himself, closely followed by three young men.

This was not a new thing for Mabille, and Bautru would not have noticed it, had it not taken an unexpected turn. The scene was a dark avenue, which the women had probably entered in order to get rid of the gallants who were following them, for they hastened on without a word. Presently, indeed, they began to run, but their tormentors soon overtook and surrounded them. Then Bautru, who was near at hand, saw one of the women suddenly break away, and run toward him.

The situation was easily understood. The lady relied upon his assistance, but in such a place he scarcely cared to play the part of a protector. His first impulse was to stand aside and let the fugitive pass, for

she might, perhaps, wish to be pursued; but he had only to look at her to see that this was not the case.

The women who are in the habit of going to Mabille do not look like ladies of good society who have ventured there on the sly, and Guy was not likely to make a mistake in such a case. Merely by the thick black veil which hid the frightened woman's face he could guess that she had come there, through curiosity, to see, not to be seen, and that her fright was not feigned.

He saw, at once, what was going on. The three gallants looked like tipsy clerks, and the person whom they now surrounded must be the lady's maid. It was better to interfere, and he did so, not over eagerly, but because he did not care to leave a woman of good standing in the hands of some ill-bred scamps.

"Take my arm, madame," said he.

The help which he offered was accepted without ceremony, as it was given. The lady certainly belonged to good society. A middle-class woman would have demurred, and an adventuress would have been noisy in her thanks.

The lively young men remained to be dealt with. The most determined of them came running up, but Bautru's attitude moderated his ardour. He stopped short, made a mocking gesture, ran across a grass plot and disappeared behind the bushes. The two others, thinking this a good way to escape explaining their conduct to a knight-errant, who did not seem likely to put up with any nonsense, ran off among the plants near by, breaking some of the little lamps which they overturned as they passed along.

Guy, remaining master of the field, was somewhat embarrassed as to what he should do. He felt the woman's well-gloved hand tremble upon his arm, and he waited for her to speak.

"I beg of you, sir," she said, in a voice of entreaty, "to take me to the gate. My maid will go for a cab."

"I am entirely at your disposal, madame," replied Bautru.

They met no one going out, and they reached the neutral ground of the Avenue Montaigne without being molested or interfered with.

The unknown lady whom he was escorting then dragged him towards the cross-roads in the Champs Elysées, while the maid darted off to engage one of the empty cabs which were always near the entrance when the ball was coming to an end.

Some twenty paces from the gateway, at an intermediate distance between two gas lamps, the woman, who so far had barely spoken, gently disengaged her arm, and said in a soft voice: "I shall never forget the service which you have done me, and I feel very happy at having been rescued by Monsieur Guy de Bautru."

"You know my name, then?" exclaimed Bautru.

"Yes, sir, I have long known you by name and reputation," said the stranger, who was gradually recovering her composure. "Do you think I should have confided myself to the first person who came along?"

"Any well-bred man would have done as I did, and you do not owe me any thanks, madame, but you would do me a great favour by telling me your name; and, since we are acquainted——"

"I didn't say that we were; you do not know me, and I beg of you not to ask me to make myself known, here, at all events. I do not wish you to think ill of me. Perhaps, we may have a chance of meeting again, and I will then explain why I ventured to come to this ball, where, without

you—but here is my maid, who has found a cab. Allow me to leave you. If I were found here I should be ruined."

The vehicle was now at hand, and the servant got out and held the door open.

Without objecting to the sudden parting upon which the strange lady insisted, and without taking the trouble to pay her any compliments, Guy helped her into the vehicle and simply bowed. She thanked him in one word, and in a tone which showed she was grateful to him for being so reserved, and then sat back in the cab. Guy heard the maid tell the coachman to drive up the Champs Elysées, and he saw the cab roll off towards the Arc de Triomphe, without feeling any regret at the woman's departure.

"I begin to think that she really belongs to good society, and wants to go home alone," he said to himself. "If she had been some adventuress playing the great lady she would have contrived to let me catch sight of her face, and the maid would have given her exact address, so that I might have heard it. But I did not see even the tip of her nose. Is she pretty or ugly? I know that she has a beautiful figure and a graceful gait. But I can't guess who she is, to save my life. She knows me, that's clear, as she called me by name, but that only shows that she has met me at some one's house, or in public. Now, why did she go to Mabille? To watch some lover, or her husband, without being seen, of course! If she had come to keep an appointment she wouldn't have brought the maid with her, and she wouldn't have gone into the dark avenue where those rascals annoyed her. They frightened her terribly. She trembled like a leaf. It was easy to see that she wasn't accustomed to being annoyed in that way."

As he thus soliloquised Guy reached the cross-roads.

"But what do I care about this woman?" he muttered. "I shall never see her again, and I don't wish to see her, but I do wish to know what has happened to Madeleine's husband, if anything has really happened. I would give ten napoleons to know the truth, but I cannot learn it until to-morrow. Until then I must wait, and the best thing that I can do is to attack the expected Brazilian at the club. If I could win twenty thousand francs to-night I should have my summer's pocket money before me, and if there is anything new at Maugars' I shall need to have my mind at ease. A quarter to twelve! Just the right time to get to the club if I don't want to miss the beginning of the game."

With these words Bautru sprung into a passing victoria, and gave an address to the Jehu, who drove off. He felt as eager as some young sub-lieutenant just out of the military school of Saint Cyr. He ardently desired to rush into action, although this was by no means his first campaign. On the contrary, he often won large sums, although he rarely kept them. He did not know how to limit himself either in winning or losing, so that he almost always ended by emptying his pockets after filling them. Hence it was that the fortune which he had inherited from his father had melted away like wax before the fire. A young nobleman who, on reaching his majority comes into an income of twenty thousand francs a year, and no more, does not keep up long when he leads such a life as is led in Paris, and Guy de Bautru had been of age for four years now.

However, he still followed his course, and even kept up appearances very well, and if he was in want of money, his acquaintances did not know it. Busserolles alone knew something about his real situation. For the final

crash was coming, and Bautru, who saw it approach without much alarm, had sworn to struggle on till the end should come, and make no sign. He even hoped to retrieve the situation, and did not wish to lose such a chance as that of worsting the Brazilian at the club.

He arrived there just as the foreign grandee was seating himself at the table, where baccarat was being played in a retired room. The players were numerous, and the game promised to be a warm one, for the noble foreigner had just announced that he would hold the bank, and had placed fifty thousand francs before him.

This was all that was needed to bring the most inveterate of the gamblers present together. They had not had so fine a chance for a long time. There had been some heavy losses towards the end of the winter. The losers had since then kept at a distance, and the game had languished, so that the arrival of a capitalist fresh from South America created a sensation. It was expected that he would make things look lively again, and it was hoped that his money would be spread about like heavenly manna among those who had been worsted during the winter season.

This millionaire, who was said to have grown rich in working a diamond-field, did not look at all like a savage bred in the forest wilds. He was somewhat too dark, to be sure, his hair was rather too thick, and his jewels too conspicuous, but he did not talk loudly, nor gesticulate, and he spoke French almost without a foreign accent. He had half a dozen surnames, so difficult to pronounce that the players could not remember one of them, but called him familiarly, "Don Manöel."

Bautru now saw him for the first time ; but he was soon made acquainted with him by those who usually played, and so wealthy an adversary seemed to him worthy of being vigorously attacked. Guy had nine notes of a thousand francs each, and twenty napoleons in his pocket : his entire fortune in hard cash, which he usually carried about him, as he did not care to be taken with a sudden fancy without having the means of gratifying it, at hand. This amount was amply sufficient to begin the attack, and Guy, whose credit, had not yet suffered at the club, was at liberty to draw upon the manager's cash-box, which lends counters accepted at the gaming-table as cash.

The seats were drawn for by lots, and Guy obtained the one he preferred, the first on the left of the banker. This piece of luck seemed to him to promise well, and he began by staking fifty napoleons, which attracted Don Manöel's attention, for the other stakes were comparatively small.

The Brazilian dexterously distributed the cards, like an old veteran at baccarat, and three quarters of an hour after the game had begun, Bautru was master of the field of battle. The right wing of players was routed, but the left, which he commanded, had completely subdued the enemy. Don Manöel had nothing more before him, and Bautru had won forty thousand francs. The minor players, who had staked with him, had shared the rest among them.

The deal was about to end, and everybody was wondering whether the banker would throw up the game. Their uncertainty did not last long, however. Don Manöel produced a thick portfolio, and drew from it a roll of bank-notes, which he laid upon the table. He did this very quietly.

There was a murmur of applause, and those who had suffered began to breathe once more. There is always hope as long as one can hold the cards. On the other hand, no one is sure of his winnings until he is safe at home.

Guy, who had learned all this from long experience, was greatly tempted to leave the club, so as to place his gains beyond the reach of ill luck. Fortune had granted his wishes, inconsistent divinity though she was, and one to whom he had offered up so many sacrifices. He had double the sum that he had wished for to spend his summer free from anxiety. This was the time or never for going to his room to read over the anonymous letter which he had in his pocket, and to meditate upon the consequences which might follow the catastrophe it announced.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the Brazilian, with the coolness of an Englishman, "I am quite willing to go on."

"So are we!" exclaimed all the losers at once.

"However," said Manöel, addressing Guy, "if this gentleman wishes to withdraw from the game I will ask leave to stop, for I should have little chance of recovering my losses. I beg him, however, not to feel obliged to give me my revenge now. My losses to-night are unimportant, and we can begin again to-morrow."

Guy did not reply at once. He was reflecting.

"Bautru, you mustn't leave us," said a voice on the right.

"No, indeed. Who ever leaves a game when doubling the stakes proves successful?"

"Bautru, you would ruin your reputation as a good player."

"One more round to keep up the honour of Anjou."

"The meu of Anjou stake, but they never surrender."

"Calm yourselves, gentlemen," said Guy. "I will remain."

"Bravo! Long live Bautru! Bautru for ever!"

"I think, sir," said Don Manöel, "that you do well to go on, for I feel that this is one of my unlucky days, and I shan't regret losing my money to you. I like the men who stake boldly."

Guy took this compliment for what it was worth, and the applause of those around did not move him. If he had resolved to work his lucky vein to its end, it was because he hoped to repair the disasters of years in a single night. The Brazilian was a man capable of leaving half a million upon the card-table, and Guy thought what all gamblers think, when they hope to win a fortune from chance: "Why not?" And he said to himself: "If I could win five hundred thousand francs, with what remains of my own, I should be richer than ever, and could begin my life over again. I will play no more after that; and if Madeleine becomes a widow, her father will think me a good match for her."

The dealing began, and Bautru, determined upon risking everything, began by a stake of five thousand francs, which he lost. The sums which followed fared no better. Luck had changed. The right side was winning now, and the most trying disappointments followed on the left. When Bautru announced eight points the banker announced nine, and this went on in like manner, Guy still struggling very pluckily, but in vain.

He was at last obliged to apply to the club cash-box for ten thousand francs' worth of counters, as all his money was gone. He duly gave his I O U in exchange. He did not blench, but, rising without a word, he then went away quietly, Don Manöel saying, with his eternal smile, as he got up: "You have been unlucky, sir, but I beg you to believe that you will find me at your orders to-morrow."

"Thanks," replied Guy, although he had just been fleeced. He appeared very calm, but he would have liked to strangle the Brazilian, who had so politely ruined him.

"What! are you going, Bautru?" called out one of the players on the right hand side, who had been winning; "shall I lend you twenty-five napoleons?"

"Thank you, my friend, I have twenty in my pocket, and I prefer to keep them there."

"You can't make us believe that you are going to bed at this hour."

"No; I am going to meet Busserolles at the Café Anglais."

The cards were distributed, and the player who had generously offered the twenty-five napoleons became absorbed in his game. Bautru was allowed to go away unnoticed.

He was in despair, and had no more idea of supping than of sleeping. He went down to the boulevard and began walking about without seeing who passed him, or where he was going.

"Twenty napoleons in my pocket and nothing in my desk at home!" he thought, with bitter regret. "My summer will be a gay one. I've had a pretty night of it! I must sell some more land, and that will be the last of all. And one can't sell land like old clothes, by calling to the first purchaser that turns up. I shan't be able to sell in a couple of days, and if I don't take back my note for ten thousand francs in forty-eight hours I shall be posted at the club. Who will lend me the money? Busserolles has some coin, but he never lends any, even to his friends. There's Prunavaux, but, lawyer-like, he would question Maugars as to the value of a mortgage on my land. Besides, all this would take up too much time. Shall I write to my uncle? No, that would be of no use. He is no miser, but he has ideas of his own as to nephews who rush to ruin. He would not even reply. I can't think of any one but Frédoc, who would help me at a pinch. Yes, Frédoc is the only man who would oblige me, off-hand, and lend me a thousand louis without any security but my note. He is very obliging and very friendly. He is acquainted with my situation, and knows that I am sufficiently well off to pay him back. But has he any money on hand? Twenty thousand francs is quite a sum, and Frédoc, who is a very steady old bachelor, must have invested his money so as to draw a regular income from it, and perhaps he wouldn't care to touch any of it for me."

This last reflection made Bautru still more low-spirited, and he again began to give way to the most mournful ideas. He cursed the Brazilian, the game of baccarat, the club, and his own folly.

"When I think," he muttered, "that I had only to avoid playing, that I had some excellent tips for the whole racing season, and enough to go on with for two or three months, it seems as though I should go mad. I might have recovered myself at the Grand Prix. No, the devil himself must have sent me into that gambling hell! Frédoc was right. The Café Anglais would have been far better. Well, I will tell him what has happened. He is a good soul, and gave me some proper advice to-night; to-morrow morning he will, perhaps, be willing to give me a lift."

With this idea, Guy began to ask himself what he had better do until the time arrived when he could with propriety call upon the gentleman from whom he intended to borrow the money he wanted. On leaving the club he had said that he was going to join the gay party with Busserolles at the Café Anglais, but this was the boast of a loser who wishes to seem reconciled to his losses. He had, in reality, no desire to take any supper, and still less to sleep.

The prospect of tossing about in bed, as a man always does when he has

lost heavily, and does not know how to pay up, frightened him more than the prospect of the idle talk and disagreeable noise of the little party made up at Mabille. He hesitated. Suddenly, it occurred to him that he ought to be very hungry, as nothing makes a man feel so empty as losing at cards. He concluded that he had better eat so as to pick up some strength for the next day, and that drinking might make him forget his sorrows for the time. Besides, on leaving the club, he had strolled mechanically towards the *Café Anglais*, and his meditations upon the game and the loan he needed had led him, without his knowledge, to the corner of the Rue de Marivaux.

He looked up, and on the first floor of the fashionable restaurant he saw a brilliantly-lighted private room, which he well knew. He had squandered many napoleons, and lost many an illusion there. The windows were open, and various sounds broke upon his ears, notably a soprano voice, so shrill and piercing that it reminded one of an engine whistle.

"Antonia has come," muttered Bautru. "I know that falsetto. I am tired of seeing that canary bird, who was so much admired in Holland. Suppose I go to bed! No, I shouldn't close my eyes, and I should be too stupid for anything to-morrow morning, just at the time when I wish to see my old friend, Frédoc. One or two bottles of good wine will set me right again. I will go home after that, and take a cold shower-bath, and at nine I will start, fresh and fair, to find my providential acquaintance. I shall have time to recover from the effects of it all when I have my money in hand. So I have made up my mind, and in I go! I shall only have to stop up my ears if the Grasshopper insists upon vocalising any more."

He now went up unhesitatingly, for he had quite forgotten the anonymous letter which had troubled him so much before his own misfortune. Gamblers are always egotists, and since Guy had been stumped, he had not given a thought to the rumours affecting M. de Maugars' honour.

He now directed his steps towards private room No. 16, and found Busserolles, Girac, and Rangouze at table there, with Rosine sitting at the head, Antonia singing, and the inevitable Zélia strumming on the battered piano. Supper had proceeded in his absence, and some Bordeaux crawfish, highly seasoned, had loosened every tongue, accompanied, as they were, by various wines. The iced Brut Impérial was waiting, and Bautru had just come in time to drown his sorrows in its golden flow.

"Well, so here you are, at last!" cried Busserolles. "That's lucky! I thought that Méteil had taken you with him to his office to help him correct his proofs. What the deuce is the meaning of all his mysteries?"

"There's no meaning at all," replied Guy, who suddenly remembered everything concerning this forgotten subject.

"I'll venture to say that he had something to say against me," remarked Antonia, between two false notes. "He has a spite against me; I can't imagine why. I am sure that he will attack me when I come out."

"You are going to appear in public, then, Grasshopper?" said Girac, who was always very familiar with everybody when he had been taking a little wine.

"Yes, my dear."

"At Montmartre, Batignolles, Grenelle, or some such low place?"

"No, sir, at a reliable theatre, which has been hired for me, and with three hundred thousand francs subscribed, to begin with."

"What a story!"

"Story! The contract is signed, my little man, and if I wished to convince you, I might tell the name of the person who has advanced the money."

"What stuff!"

"You defy me to do it, then? Well, then, his name is—"

"Antonia!" exclaimed Rosine, "are you going crazy?"

This interruption was accompanied by a look which closed the imprudent Grasshopper's indiscreet lips.

"Instead of talking about nothing," resumed Rosine, "we might as well give your friend Bautru a seat. He didn't come here to listen to anybody's stupid talk."

"True," said Antonia, "you keep the poor fellow from eating. Sit down, my Guy-Guy, and try to catch up with us. There is some turkey, chicken salad, and Russian salad left. I will help you, and Zélie will fill your glass. You are polite, and don't make fun of women."

Bautru first drank a full glass of Moët's sparkling Brut Impérial—the king of champagne wines—and then having satisfied his thirst, he attacked the boned turkey.

"Take care, my dear," said Rosine. "Slenderness is very becoming to you, and Berthe Champigny, whom you admire, insisted this evening that you were growing fat."

"I have just lost a thousand louis, and ought to look thin," replied Guy, taking larger mouthfuls than before.

"Good! but how did you lose them?" exclaimed Busserolles.

"To a native of the Brazilian soil who always has a five for a four."

"You have been at the club, I see! You had much better have stayed with us. The deuce! Nineteen thousand francs is a sum."

"Yes, it makes nearly a thousand francs a year income," said Bautru, in a tone of irony.

"But if that sort of straight-jacket suits you, nobody else cares."

"It doesn't suit me, on the contrary!"

"Tell me," said the Grasshopper, "do you want a thousand louis, or fifteen hundred? I can raise that amount for you."

"Thank you, my dear friend! I only borrow of men."

"The deuce take your squeamishness. What difference will it make to me?"

"It would make a great deal to me," replied Bautru, laughingly. "Don't let us talk about it any more. You are a very obliging girl, however."

"Much too obliging," grumbled Rosine.

"Bautru will write to his uncle," said Busserolles. "That would be much more proper."

"True! he has an uncle," said Girac. "I wish that I had an uncle left, but I have already ruined my last one."

"I shan't ruin mine. He wouldn't let me."

"Then you don't rely upon him to fill up the gap made by the Brazilian?" said Rangouze, quietly. He was the only one of the men present who had not taken too much wine.

"Not in the least! Antonia, pray give me a little Russian salad."

The dessert was brought in at this moment, and the appearance of the strawberries cut the conversation short.

The Grasshopper profited by this interruption to go to the piano with her faithful Zélie, and Rosine followed.

Bautru continued to despatch his Russian salad and drink his champagne. Busserolles and Girac did not open their lips. Their comrade's loss had caused a feeling of restraint. They were, perhaps, thinking that the fleeced gentleman might ask them to lend him some money. As for Rangouze, he had lit a cigarette and sat by the window, smoking.

Guy, scarcely surprised by the effect of his communication, was thinking of his visit to Frédoc and of the letter which Busserolles had reminded him about in speaking of Méteil. Having satisfied his hunger and thirst, he rose from the table, and sauntered towards Rangouze so as to take the air at the window.

"You will perhaps think me very indiscreet," suddenly said the native of Provence, "but I will tell you something. If you need any money—Oh! I am not going to offer to lend you any"—this was in answer to a gesture of Bautru's which seemed to imply that he did not care to be under obligation to him—"I should have great pleasure in obliging you, but all my funds are invested in a certain operation. But I know a money-lender who will serve your turn."

"At once?"

"To-morrow, or rather this morning, if you like."

"Upon my note? I have no other security to offer him."

"He will take that, I'll answer for it."

"And give me twenty thousand francs for a note at three months?"

"Thirty, if you want them."

"Then the best thing I can do is to make a note of the address of this wonder among money-lenders."

"His name is Guénégaud, and he lives at No. 115 Rue des Vinaigriers. You will find him there between twelve and two."

"You know him, I see."

"Very well; I may tell you that he has obliged me several times—this is between ourselves, of course, for if it were known that I had applied to him my credit would suffer, and as I am doing some business—"

"He is a usurer, isn't he?" interrupted Guy.

"Yes, as he lends at higher than legal rates, but I believe him honest."

"And you say that he won't insist upon making inquiries about me, before—"

"It is enough for you to mention my name. I can write him a note when I go home, telling him that you will call upon him. I am sure, however, that he knows all about you. It is his business to play the banker for young men of good families who are unlucky at cards, and he has very exact information about all the members of the important clubs."

"Then he is a very desirable man to know, and I shall go to him tomorrow, without fail. May I rely upon your writing to him?"

"I shall certainly do so."

"Thank you, Rangouze. If I succeed with him you will have got me out of a bad scrape. In three months I shall have the money for a farm I intend to sell, but just now I am without a penny. But I must ask you to say nothing about this matter, for I don't want our good little comrades here to know what a fix I am in."

"Don't disturb yourself, my dear fellow, I shall be as silent as an owl."

"What are you plotting over there?" said Rosine, stealing up to them. "We are waiting for you to eat our strawberries."

"Bah ! Antonia is singing."

"Antonia is a giddy creature who will come to want. I told you so before. Let her gargle her throat with roulades, and come and sit down. Busserolles has been yawning till he has almost dislocated his jaws, Girac is insensible to what is going on around him, and I have a dull time of it when you are not there."

"Let us amuse ourselves. I shall be delighted if it is possible," gaily replied Bautru, whose good humour had returned to him since he saw a way to get out of his troubles without climbing up the staircase of a friend to borrow his money.

It was time for the party to rouse itself, for things were dull enough. There was too much music. Zélie was playing a strain that would have maddened a stoic, and Antonia's trills were altogether beyond description. Besides, the piano was out of tune.

Bautru was about to rise and close the dreadful instrument of torture, when a waiter entered the room and approached him, saying that a gentleman wished to speak to him.

"Who is it ?" asked Guy. "I am not expecting anybody."

"You are not expecting me, of course !" exclaimed a deep bass voice which came from the hall through the half-open door.

"My uncle !" exclaimed Bautru, in astonishment.

"Yes, your uncle himself," replied the voice. "Am I disturbing you ?"

The door of the room was now thrown wide open, and the startled party saw a strange-looking personage come in. He was a man at least six feet tall, as tough-looking as a centenarian oak; florid, and bearded like a water-god. All that was wanting was a club to make him look exactly like one of the heraldic giants which figure as "supports" upon armorial bearings. He must have been a very handsome fellow in his youth, and, although his whiskers were silvered, he did not seem an old man, even now.

Zélie, who, being very thin, fancied stout people, gazed admiringly at him, as also did Antonia. But she did not admire his attire. He wore a jacket of unfashionable cut, a hat like a bell, which was set upon his head in helmet fashion, a spotted necktie, nankeen trousers, and white gaiters. But, in spite of this superannuated garb, he looked like a gentleman, and it was impossible to take him for a commercial traveller or a sub-prefect.

"How are you, Guy—how are you ?" said he, shaking hands with his nephew. "Glad to see you, my boy. Didn't expect me, eh ?"

"Not in the least," stammered Bautru ; "especially in this place."

"My dear lad, I got here at forty minutes past midnight, at the Montparnasse station. I drove to the Grand Hôtel to take an indispensable bath, and that made it two when I reached the boulevard. The old place is altered a great deal. More kiosks for selling the newspapers than promenaders. I did not walk about for long. I wanted to find you as soon as possible, but I thought that you wouldn't be in your rooms at the Rue Auber. You must go to bed just as I get up at La Brèche. So I went to your club, and a servant obligingly informed me that you were at the Café Anglais. That suited me exactly, as I feel half starved. But I was afraid that you might not be supping alone, and I could hardly make up my mind to rush into the room like a bull into a china shop. Still, I resolved to appear at last. Have I disturbed you ?"

"No, indeed. I and my friends are delighted to see you."

"Introduce me, then."

"My uncle, Monsieur Souscarrière," began Bautru, addressing the assembled party.

"Add, formerly an officer of cavalry. Then everybody will know what kind of man I am."

"Oh, these gentlemen know all about you! They've often heard me talk about you."

"Good! But how about the ladies? Do you suppose that I don't wish to show them that I didn't win my cross at a ball?"

"But on the field of battle," interposed the Grasshopper. "We all guessed that, general."

"Say colonel. I was a colonel in the Territorial. I got my ear slit last year—but no matter, it's only a trifling wound."

"Uncle," said Bautru, "this is my friend, Henri Busserolles, Monsieur Alfred Girac, Monsieur Jules de Rangouze."

The various gentlemen bowed, and were honoured by a firm grip from the "heavy" uncle. Busserolles examined this relic of a bygone time with polite attention. Girac looked at him as though he would have liked to measure his height, and Rangouze, who watched him askance, wondered how much he was worth.

"Mademoiselle Antonia, a comic vocalist."

"Comic! Don't believe it, colonel! I am a serious woman."

"At your age, mademoiselle? That's a mistake," replied Souscarrière, laughing.

Guy resumed: "Mademoiselle Zélie, a distinguished pianist. Madame Rosine de Villemomble, householder."

"You might have said actress," replied that lady.

"A woman may be both, my dear friend:

"If a woman begins on the stage, she ends with a house of her own!"

hummed Guy to a well-known air.

"Now," began the uncle, seating himself without further ceremony, "I will ask these ladies to allow me to take some supper! Where are you? At dessert? Well, I will drink a bottle of champagne to catch up with you."

"Yes, Moët's Brut Impérial," said Bautru, filling his uncle's glass.

"Ah! so that's the fashionable wine, now. Well, pass me the chicken salad, my lad! Your champagne isn't bad by any means."

Souscarrière had already swallowed half the contents of the champagne bottle put before him, and was devouring the salad, which was the largest dish upon the table, and one that Bautru had scarcely touched. This style of doing things won him the respect of the whole party. Girac, who had a weak stomach which two glasses of wine upset, envied the bacchanalian capacities of the provincial Gargantua; and Antonia, who liked great eaters and drinkers, thought that Guy's uncle was not so bad, after all.

"Good," said he, as he looked up again. "This Brut Impérial is splendid. There are still some decent suppers to be had in Paris."

"Twenty times better than in your time, colonel," said Busserolles, "but not at the same places."

"No doubt Monsieur de Souscarrière only remembers the Café de Paris, which was shut up twenty-two years ago," sneered Girac.

"Yes, young man," replied the colonel; "you never saw the Café de Paris, the one on the Boulevard des Italiens. You were not even weaned when I won my famous bet—a bet that you would have lost I'll wager. I'll tell you all about it one of these days. Meantime, oblige me by call-

ing me Monsieur Souscarrière without the *de*. My great-great-great-grandfather was a pastry-cook under Louis XIII., and his descendants are simple citizens."

"What do you say to that, Bautru?" exclaimed the Grasshopper, with a loud laugh.

"My nephew is as noble as a king, little one. There were two Bautru's in the First Crusade. His father let himself down when he married my sister."

"Take care, sir," said Rosine, spitefully. "You may prevent Guy from making a fine match."

"Provided he does not marry some rich adventuress, I don't care, my dear madame."

"That was a good hit," muttered Girac.

Rosine half-choked with rage, and Zélie laughed behind her fan, while Antonia with difficulty contrived to keep from laughing also. Bautru was not very well pleased. He never boasted of his nobility, but he thought that his uncle might have abstained from boasting of his low origin.

The terrible uncle was still wagging his jaws and drinking copiously, while the ladies ate their strawberries. He had now finished his second bottle of Brut Impérial. The chicken salad had vanished, and the bowl of Russian salad had nothing left in it.

Bautru, who wished to go, rang for some coffee and Maraschino.

"Ah!" said the colonel, with a sigh of satisfaction, "I feel better now. That railroad trip had almost starved me. I am hungry yet, but I want to keep some appetite for breakfast."

"This is wonderful!" muttered Girac, who was struggling with indigestion at the moment.

"Guy, have you a good cigar to give me?" asked M. Souscarrière. "Down there in my pigeon-hole I don't smoke anything but a pipe; but I haven't come here to poison myself with bad tobacco. What do these cost you?" he added, after taking a cigar from his nephew's case.

"Seventy-five centimes, uncle."

"They are the same that I bought for seven centimes in Geneva in '56, at Bonnet's, on the Place des Bergues. If the price of oxen had gone up at the same rate, you would come in for a nice sum in about twenty years, for I expect to live till 1900."

"So you will, colonel!" said Girac; "you will see the twentieth century come in; mind what I tell you!"

"How old we shall be then!" sighed the Grasshopper.

"Don't be afraid, my girl," said Rosine, with a spiteful smile, "you won't live long enough to grow old."

"So much the better! I shan't grow ugly then or be obliged to lay up money to have an income."

"Rosine is always kind in her remarks," muttered Zélie.

"May I ask you, sir, if land sells well in your part of the country?" asked Rangouze.

"Ask my nephew," replied Souscarrière, in a bantering tone. "He has been selling his land ever since he came of age. He has sold three lots, and he ought to know the prices they sell at."

"I have two more," said Bautru, eagerly, for he was thinking of the money which he was forced to borrow, and did not wish that Rangouze should imagine that he had nothing left to make up the sum.

"Oh, don't go on talking about your farms!" exclaimed Antonia.

"Business is horrid. I'm going home if that's what you mean to talk about."

The coffee was now brought in, and the colonel who found it to his taste, nodded his head as a sign of satisfaction.

"Did you come to Paris for the Grand Prix?" asked Busserolles, to change the subject.

"Not exactly. I was once more interested in horses than in races, but at that time I went from one place to another to hunt in Lower Brittany. I believe that I should have stayed at home all this summer if I had not received a letter from my old friend Maugars. I have not seen him for seven years, and he has just married his daughter. He wrote to me that if I did not come within twenty-four hours he would never speak to me again, and so I made up my mind to come."

"Somewhat late, uncle," interrupted Guy. "The wedding took place this morning at church. I was there, and Madame de Puygarrault made a scene with me in the vestry because you had not appeared."

"Does the marchioness still trouble her head about me? She used to preach to me once, and predict that I should end my days between two mangy terriers, and a couple of servants with the asthma, and faith, she's not far wrong! What are you pouring out there? Kummel? I don't fancy these new-fangled drinks. Give me a glass of old brandy to drive away the effects of the coffee. Martell! Good! I like that better. Now, my dear boy, I will tell you that I hate to be bored. If I had come in time for the wedding I should have had to go to the municipal offices and the church. White tie and all that! I wanted to oblige Maugars, but I wished to escape the ceremony, and I managed to do so. To-morrow morning I shall go to see our friend the count. I shall kiss his daughter, and he will introduce me to his son-in-law."

"If he is still in Paris," muttered Guy.

"Where the devil should he be? Ah, yes! the fashionable way of doing things! What do you call that in English? The newly married couple start off for Switzerland or the Pyrenees. What a ridiculous idea! I shouldn't have thought that Maugars would countenance such nonsense. If I had a daughter I shouldn't pack her off as soon as she was married."

"Tell me, Busserolles," said Rosine, who for the last quarter of an hour had been trying to say something disagreeable to the colonel, because he had called her "a rich adventuress," "did you read the papers this evening?"

"I? I never read the papers. I hate politics. Why do you ask me that?"

"Because I found such a strange story in one of them, a story which seems to refer to Mademoiselle de Maugars' wedding."

"In M^{et}el's paper?" asked Guy.

"No; in another. You know that M^{et}el's paper only comes out in the morning."

"What was the story?"

"It said that the police had arrested a gentleman who had just been married, and at the very moment when he was leaving the church; a gentleman belonging to the best society; the circumstance occurred in the Chausse^e d'Antin, so it was said, and if I am not mistaken, your Maugars lives in the Place de la Trinit^e."

"And you imagine that the story relates to his son-in-law! My dear Rosine, I must say that you have lost your head."

"What nonsense!" exclaimed the Grasshopper. "I was at the mass and I saw nothing of the kind."

"Well, for my part," replied Rosine, sharply, "I know some one who saw something very strange."

"What was it?" asked Bautru, growing more and more disturbed every moment.

The guests pricked up their ears, for this beginning was calculated to rouse their curiosity. The colonel was the only person who did not pay much attention to what Rosine was saying. He was leaning back in his chair apparently absorbed in watching the smoke of his cigar as it rose in blue spirals towards the ceiling.

"This is it," continued Rosine. "One of my friends went, as Antonia did, to see the dresses at La Trinité. There were but few people there, and she had a good chance to stare at the bride. Mademoiselle de Maugars is rather pretty, she told me, but my friend looked more at the bridegroom, who, she says, is very handsome. She went in towards the end of the mass, and then went to her dressmaker's in the Boulevard Haussmann."

"Cut your story short," exclaimed Girac. "It isn't sufficiently thrilling."

"Wait! My friend remained for about three-quarters of an hour at her dressmaker's house, and she was again going up the Chaussée d'Antin, when, just as she passed before one of the last houses, she saw—guess who?—coming out of a door."

"Antonia's beau, who had followed her from Holland," laughed Busserolles.

"My dear friend, you are very stupid," said the Grasshopper.

"The President of the Republic of Honduras?"

"Oceana dressed as a ballet girl?"

"Nordenskiold with a sealskin overcoat?"

"Better than all that, my excellent friends. Esther—my friend's name is Esther—was very nearly upset by a gentleman whom she recognised perfectly well. It was the Count de Maugars' new son-in-law."

"Well, what of that?" asked Busserolles, shrugging his shoulders.

"That clearly proves that he had not been arrested," said Bautru.

"Let me finish. The newly married man was in his wedding clothes, but he had no hat on, and he held both hands to his head."

"Then your friend could not have seen his face," replied Girac.

"Excuse me, she saw it distinctly; she also saw that Monsieur d'Estelan was very pale, that he had a wound on his forehead, and that his clothes were in disorder. He looked, she said, like a man who had been struggling with some one, and had broken away."

"This is perfectly absurd! You can't make us believe that Mademoiselle de Maugars' husband got into a quarrel as he came out of church, and was running away for fear of being taken to the lock-up. Those things only happen at low weddings. Your friend Esther must have been reading realistic novels."

"Esther never reads anything, and has no imagination whatever, but she has excellent eyesight, and she was not mistaken, I'll venture to say."

"Where was this phenomenal son-in-law going in such a condition? To buy some cigars at the tobacco-shop, or some candles of the grocer at the corner?"

"I don't know where he was going, but he called a cab, a closed cab,

into which he got after giving some address to the driver; then he lowered the blinds, and the cab started off towards the Place de la Trinité."

"Where his wife was probably waiting for him. He probably carried her off, English fashion. I think that was a very stylish way of doing things," muttered Girac.

"What do you think of all this?" asked Busserolles, addressing Guy.

"What the deuce would you have me think? I think that some one has been fooling Rosine, or that Rosine is fooling us."

"And I, gentlemen," said Souscarrière, "think that my friend Maugars would not like all this ridiculous nonsense about his daughter's husband. I don't like it myself, and for that reason I am going to bed. Guy, my lad, ask for the bill and pay for us both. I won't offend you by paying for my share."

"I hope not," muttered Bautru, rising to ring.

No one said anything further. The short speech made by the colonel had curtailed all commentaries, but the effect of the story was the same, and the guests were anxious to repeat the tale as told by Rosine.

While the waiter was asking, as usual, how many glasses of brandy the gentlemen had drunk, and whether they had smoked or not, Souscarrière went to the window to look out, and his nephew profited by the chance afforded him to draw Rangouze aside. "I shall go to your man's house at noon," he said, in a low tone.

"Why don't you apply to your uncle?"

"He wouldn't lend me as much as a turnip. That is a principle with him. But I can rely on your writing to our man, can't I?"

"I shall certainly do so."

The bill, which was a large one, was then brought in, and the colonel came back to the table just as the napoleons were falling on to it.

"I am sure that I have cost my nephew at least forty francs," laughed he. "At the Café de la Regence in Algiers they don't charge so high. You call a bill an 'addition' now-a-days, don't you? An addition! that smells of the counter, and I hate figures! But I don't hate good cheer, and I hope, gentlemen, that at some early day you will dine with me. Guy shall choose the restaurant and order the dinner."

"No ladies invited?" asked the Grasshopper.

"Do you imagine that I am afraid of ladies? Bring all your friends if you like. It will remind me of old times."

"Colonel, you are my ideal of a man! I have a great mind to sing Schneider's air from 'La Grand Duchesse':

"I love the soldiers! I love the soldiers!"

"Oh, no! no!" cried Girac and Rangouze in a breath, "we've had too much vocalism as it is."

"Sir," said Busserolles, who prided himself upon his politeness, "we shall be most happy to—"

"Never mind about that, now," interrupted Souscarrière. "You will come—that's enough! My nephew will tell you the day, and arrange the party with these ladies, as an old grey-headed trooper does not frighten them. Come, Guy, let us be off to our headquarters, my lad."

Guy was only too glad to get away. So the uncle and nephew made a military retreat after shaking hands all round. When they reached the street, the dawn was already breaking, and the gas-lighters were extinguishing the lamps everywhere.

" You must take me to the Grand Hôtel, and we will walk there," said Souscarrière. " It will do you good, and I want to talk to you. Give me another cigar. They are very fair. You must tell me to-morrow where I can get some of the same. Meantime, who are these friends of yours? Swells, I can see that. You have often spoken of Busserolles, but who are the others ? "

" Girac has some money which he is squandering very foolishly. Ranguzoue is steadier, and is doing some sort of business."

" I don't care for that. I don't like his face. He looks like a sneak. But who are the women ? "

" Antonia is very much admired. Zélie is a foil whom she takes about with her to set her off. As for Rosine——"

" Oh, I saw her years ago. She used to sing in 1846 at the Café de la Perle, in the Rue Babazoun in Algiers. She was called ' Leather Helmet' then. By-the-by, what is this ridiculous stuff that she was telling us ? "

" Nothing at all, I hope. But she did not invent it. A journalist whom I met this evening told me that he had received an anonymous letter, in which there was a statement about a gentleman having been arrested as he came out of church. The same news must have been sent to some other paper, which printed it."

" Monsieur d'Estelan's name was not mentioned, however ? "

" No, but——"

" Then it cannot concern him. Let us talk of yourself. How do you get along with Maugars ? "

" I have seen very little of him this season. The marriage of his daughter was decided upon, and I——"

" You were in love with his daughter, and you may as well confess it."

" No. She pleased me greatly, but Monsieur de Maugars gave me to understand that I should not suit him, and I did not make her an offer."

" You did quite right I should never have forgiven you for running after Madeleine's dowry. I thought that Maugars would not favour your addresses. I don't know why, but I will make him tell me, and that to-day. However, no matter what may have influenced him, the young lady is married now, and that is all there is to say on the subject. Have you any other heiress in view ? "

" None whatever. She suited me, but I would just as well remain a bachelor."

" Very well ! You are twenty-five. You have served as a volunteer, and you were a quartermaster when you left the army. You have a year yet according to the new laws. Formerly, you would have had a chance till thirty."

" A year ! But I have no idea of enlisting."

" What will you do, then, when you have eaten up the Bois Guillaume and Morvieux, your two last farms ? "

" I shan't eat them up."

" You dare to tell me that ? Shall I tell you all about yourself? Your mother left you four farms which were worth five hundred thousand at least. Your father scarcely left you anything. My poor sister married him simply to be called Madame de Bautru. I was your guardian, and I handed your fortune over to you in '76, when you came of age. We are now in 1880. In less than four years you are three-parts ruined. How long will the last fourth of your property last ? "

"Much longer than the rest. Experience has made me wise," stammered Guy. "I have limited my expenses. I only keep two saddle-horses now."

"Good! I shall ride them every day while I am here. But do me the favour to listen to me instead of talking. Shall I tell you what you are turning over in your giddy head? You are thinking that some day or other you will inherit my money, and, meantime, when you have not a penny left, you will come to La Bretèche in the hope that I will let you stay there and give you bed and board?"

"You are mistaken, uncle," said Guy, quickly. "I trust that you will yet live a long time."

"Oh, I don't accuse you of wishing me dead. But I know you, my lad! Your intentions are good, but you have no strength of purpose. You will miss a career, just as you missed promotion at Saint Cyr. You will let yourself glide along on the top of the tide, and when you have bid adieu to your last coin, you will be too old to turn soldier. Now, I can't allow my nephew to pass his time staring at the Paris pavements, or running about my woods. You will tell me that I have been doing that for twenty years past; but it is quite another thing for me to live so, for I have gone through several campaigns, had five wounds, and won my decoration. Besides, when I gave in my resignation, I relied upon your taking my place. Remember this: a Bautru ought to serve in the army, or marry to keep up the race. You don't take the right road to marry; so you ought to go into the army, and you have no more time to lose. The conclusion is this: since I can't prevent you from ruining yourself, I wish you may do so as soon as possible."

"Are you speaking seriously, uncle?"

"I am; and I am sure that you are doing it exactly. At the rate at which you are living, you can't keep up six months longer, and when you are stumped you will still be of a good age to be a fine-looking cavalry officer. I even think that you could have your volunteer's epaulettes back in a trice. I will give you an allowance of a hundred francs a month, and the day that you take off your captain's uniform I will look for a wife for you. Down there, in an old desk, I have eighty-four thousand francs in gold. I don't like paper money, I have a horror of investments, and I care as much for that gold as I do for an old pair of boots. However, I wouldn't lend you even fifty napoleons, because it would prevent you from enlisting."

"I do not ask you for anything," replied Guy, stung to the quick.

"No, I know that. You would not belong to our family if you committed any abject act for money's sake. I will even add, that if you married such a wife as I wish you to take, I would let you off from military service; I would guarantee you my fortune, and sign a contract to that effect on your wedding day; and, besides, I would use my savings to buy back the farms which you have sold, and have La Bretèche rebuilt to lodge you and yours. I would only keep a little corner for myself at one end of the château. That would be charming, but it is only a dream, I fear! Instead of realising it, you will go through the greatest humiliations. Well, I have had my say. Here we are at the Grand Hôtel, and I want to sleep to-morrow. I shall probably breakfast with Maugars; but I will dine with you. I invite you for the whole time of my stay. Don't be alarmed, I shan't be here long. I came to see Maugars, and to tell you my ultimatum. Next week I shall go back to

my hole. So, good-night, nephew. I will wait for you at seven in front of the Café de la Paix."

Guy, thus dismissed, sadly wended his way home. He had no reason to feel satisfied with his achievements of the night, and he did not conceal from himself that his uncle was right in predicting his speedy ruin. The prospect of ending in the Chasseurs d'Afrique did not alarm him much. He had looked it in the face more than once after unlucky play. But he could not help thinking how much happier he would have been had he married Madeleine de Maugars, and he cursed M. d'Estelan for having come all the way from America to frustrate his hopes.

The rumours which were now spread abroad respecting Madeleine's husband returned to his mind. He did not believe them; he did not desire that any misfortune should befall a young girl whom he had once loved, and yet he could not refrain from asking himself what would happen if Mademoiselle de Maugars found herself without a husband on the morrow of her marriage.

He had great difficulty in dismissing this thought, and to get rid of it he had to recall the great embarrassment which his losses at play had caused. "If Rangouze's money-lender fails me," he said to himself as he went up the Rue Auber, "I can only enlist at once. My uncle will be so glad that he will pay my debts, and I shan't be posted at the club."

III.

"You are a widow," M. de Maugars had said to his daughter, as he caught hold of her to prevent her from rushing to the fatal window and seeing Louis d'Estelan's body lying upon the blood-stained grass in the garden.

And on the morrow of the catastrophe Madeleine, overwhelmed and crushed with grief, repeated amid her tears: "I am a widow, a widow at nineteen! a widow on my wedding-day!"

Her father, who did not leave her, lacked the courage to tell her the truth. He knew, however, what to think as to the pretended death of his son-in-law. A few hours after the terrible scene he had received a visit from the detective who had previously called upon him, and their interview together had been a stormy one. The police agent believed that an escape had been planned by Louis Vallouris and favoured by the count. Severely reprimanded by his superiors, he reproached M. de Maugars for having abused his confidence, and he swore that he would yet capture the fugitive.

The count, overwhelmed by the news of this strange resurrection, rebelled against an imputation which deeply wounded him, and haughtily defended himself against the accusation of having helped Estelan to fly. He desired, he said, to spare him the assizes, but he had not wished to spare his life. And, besides, this old soldier, so implacable as regarded questions of honour, was not the man to play a part to save a son-in-law who had disgraced himself. With an earnestness which left no doubt of his sincerity, he protested that he had believed in M. d'Estelan committing suicide, and that he hoped he might die from the effects of his fall. And he also maintained that his son-in-law had really meant to kill himself.

However, the detective accounted for the event in quite another

manner. He declared that the culprit Vallouris had known perfectly well what he was doing when he sprang from the window. "That fine gentleman could teach a professional malefactor a good deal," said he. "He did not intend in the least to put a bullet into his head, and he began by getting possession of the revolver which annoyed him. He knew that he could reach the Chaussée d'Antin from the garden, which he saw below him. He is strong and agile. A perpendicular leap of thirty feet did not alarm him at all. He risked everything, and got clear with a few bruises. But he is mistaken if he thinks he will escape us. The whole police-force is after him, and I am convinced that we shall find him again. I have engaged to do so to quiet the prefect, who threatens to dismiss me —no less a thing than that." And to M. de Maugars' questions as to what had become of the accused, the agent replied like a general who does not mean to tell his plans for the campaign to one of the enemy's allies.

It was supposed that the accused had tried to reach the frontier, but as a description of his person had been telegraphed everywhere, his arrest was certain, let him go what road he might. It was known that he had taken a cab after his fall, and that, without losing an instant, he had fled to his rooms in the Rue de Rome, changed his clothes there, and left in haste, taking with him all the money which he had in his desk.

This was all that the count could obtain from the angry officer by way of information. As to the probable result of the affair, not a word was said. The prefect would act as suited him as soon as Louis Vallouris was caught. He refused to make any concession, even that of silencing his subordinates.

This conversation exasperated M. de Maugars. After the unfortunate occurrence of the morning, he had hoped to be preserved from the greatest of all misfortunes, that of seeing his daughter condemned to bear the name of a man whom the law was in search of. Now, he had the pain of having broken the poor innocent girl's heart, and the agony of present and future uncertainty, with shame that could not be removed.

The thought of blowing out his brains again occurred to him as a means of getting out of this atrocious situation, but what a life would poor Madeleine's be if he did this ! She had no one in the world but him, her mother having died so early. To whose care could he leave her when she had lost him ? It was he who had given her to this Estelan, whom she scarcely knew, and whom she was not sure that she could love. And as the misfortune was due to his own imprudence, it was his duty to set aside his pride and resign himself to live and sustain her through the trials which awaited her.

The count reasoned with himself and succeeded in dismissing the thought of suicide which had constantly arisen in his mind. He realised that he ought not to forsake Madeleine when she was suffering the deepest sorrow, and returning to her, he wiped away her tears, trying to console her, and to speak of hope, although he had none.

He passed the night at her bedside, where she lay weeping, and in the morning, when he saw that she had become more calm, he tried to approach a delicate subject—that of the life which was now before them both. After long hesitation he had made up his mind to allow her to believe that Louis d'Estelan was dead. He might die from the effects of the fall, and if he survived, it was better that Madeleine should be ignorant of the terrible fate which threatened her husband. And, in

order to prevent her from ever learning it, M. de Maugars took thorough and effective measures.

He considered that his servants would soon know everything. He called them together, and told them that whoever among them told his daughter a single word as to what had happened would be dismissed at once, and as his servants were obedient and pleased with their situation, he trusted that they would be silent concerning the matter. The coachman, footmen, and cook had no occasion to approach Mademoiselle de Maugars in private, and Juliette, her maid, was faithful and discreet. Besides, this painful situation must soon end. The count had made up his mind to take Madeleine away with him as soon as she was able to travel. He wished to absent himself for some years, and relied upon her offering no opposition to this hurried departure.

The day had already dawned, it was growing late, and Maugars still sat at his daughter's bedside. He held the poor girl's hands in his own, and said to her: "Yes, we will leave this house in which Heaven has so deeply afflicted us. We will go far away, far from Paris, which I hate since you have suffered there so much."

"And we will never leave one another," said Madeleine. "You do not know how sad it made me to think that we were about to be separated. I ought to have been happy, and yet I feared some misfortune."

"Why did you not speak of these fears while it was still time to prevent this fatal marriage?" exclaimed the count. And then, choking back the angry feelings he experienced: "Let us leave the past," he said, with an effort. "Would you like to go back to the country where you were born?"

"To Louisiana? What! do you think of returning there?"

"Perhaps it would be as well. Have you forgotten the beautiful spot where your childhood was passed? Yes, you must have done so, as you were so young when you came away."

"I was but seven, but I have not forgotten it. Sometimes I think that I still see the green banana trees, the bright blue sky, and the great river near our house, and then I think I can hear my mother's voice."

"Your mother's voice?" murmured the count, looking down with embarrassment.

"Her voice was so soft, and her great black eyes were so kind! Do you remember the night when she died? I remember it as though it were yesterday. She was about to die, and took me in her arms and said to you: 'Love her as I have loved her.'

"Madeleine!" exclaimed Maugars, who had turned very pale.

"Pardon me! I ought to have remembered that I was recalling a great sorrow to your mind. Forgive me for having spoken of my mother to you, who never mention her."

"Yes, you have pained me. Oh, I forgive you, for it was my fault. I thought that we might go to Louisiana, as I have still some property there, but I give up the idea, the voyage would be too much for you. We will go to Scotland, to Sweden, or wherever you please. And we will go in a few days from now. We might go to-morrow, if I were not obliged to settle some business matters with Pruneaux."

"To-morrow!" said Madeleine, sadly; "that is impossible, for if you are not here, who will attend to the funeral of him we are mourning now?"

This unexpected allusion to the funeral of a man who was not dead made Maugars start. It reminded him of the difficulties of the situation,

and he felt that he would often have perplexities of this kind to deal with. But his mind was made up, and he contented himself with giving an evasive answer.

"I beg you, my dear child," he said, in an agitated tone, "to avoid letting your thoughts dwell upon mournful ideas. You suffer enough as it is. Don't increase your pain by thinking of the consequences of a frightful occurrence. The sad duty you speak of concerns me alone, and I will do all that is to be done. Think of our departure. I shall soon fiuish with my notary. Our farewells to my cousin, the marchioness, will not take long. She is our only relative, and I have no intimate friend but that savage of a Souscarrière, who has not even deigned to come here, although I invited him. I shall write to tell him what I think of his behaviour. As for that bad fellow, Guy——"

"He came——" murmured Madeleine.

"Oh, I don't care for that, and if I see his uncle, I will tell him——"

M. de Maugars did not finish what he was saying, for he suddenly remembered that he had discouraged the fine young fellow whom he was about to criticise. He now bitterly regretted having done so and given his daughter so willingly to a stranger.

"Listen, Madeleine," he said, "I wish that henceforth we should live for one another. I urged you to this unhappy marriage. I shall not advise you further. You shall be free to do as you please, and if you prefer to remain a widow, and single, we will always live together. But don't let yourself despair; strive to conquer your grief. Remember that you are but twenty, and that the future is all before you. I am no longer young, but I hope that I shall still last some years, and as long as I am alive——"

He suddenly stopped short, and asked the maid who now entered the room why she had come to interrupt him. Juliette held out a card. "Jean told the gentleman," she said, "that you could not see any one, but he insisted upon seeing you."

"Souscarrière!" exclaimed M. de Maugars, after glancing at the bit of pasteboard which the maid handed to him. "Take him into my room, and tell him that I am coming at once. Souscarrière!" he repeated, when he found himself alone with Madeleine. "He has come in good time, and I shall tell him what I think of him and receive him as he deserves. Be calm; it won't take long. You will see me presently, but I hope to find you up and dressed. If you remain in bed you will end by being seriously ill."

A kiss upon Madeleine's pale brow ended the interview, and the count hastily went out of the room. He was anxious to see his old friend; to reproach him in the first place, and finally to tell him everything, and consult him about the horrible situation in which he found himself, and which even his daughter ignored.

He found the ex-colonel seated upon the arm of a smoking-chair, whistling the air of "La Casquette," and keeping time with the heels of his boots. It was easy to see that he felt quite at home.

"Here you are at last!" said Maugars, crossing his arms. "It is really fortunate."

"Good!" replied Souscarrière, without disturbing himself, "you are angry because I only make my appearance this morning. You see, my dear friend, that I am no longer the sort of man for entertainments where people appear in full dress. A friend who marries his daughter

always finds me to time—but not until the next day. Now, don't undertake to look like a graven image, as you used to do when you fined the subalterns in your squadron. Embrace me, Maugars, as they do in Africa."

The count could not hold out against his old brother-at arms, but opened his arms, and Guy's uncle rushed into them and gave him a hearty hug. "Good!" said Souscarrière, "I thought for a moment that you were going to turn me out instead of inviting me to breakfast."

"Breakfast! Do you want some breakfast?"

"I have not lost the habit of breakfasting, I assure you, although I do not eat quite as much as I used to do when we were in service together. But if I put you out—But what a solemn face you have! Have you met with any trouble?"

"Paul, you have been my friend for thirty-five years, and I can tell you all. Well, then, I have married Madeleine to a thief."

"What! your son-in-law—"

"Is a thief. The police came here yesterday, to my house, to arrest him."

"It is true, then?"

"You already knew it! My dishonour is known! I thank you for telling me."

"The devil take it! I don't know anything at all, and I—"

"Don't try to retract what you have said. You said—'It is true, then?' So you must have heard of what occurred here yesterday. All Paris is talking of it, no doubt. Well, my resolution is taken; I shall blow out my brains."

"Will you let me speak? I came here last night. How can I know what 'all Paris' may be talking of? In the first place, what do you mean by 'all Paris'? That is an expression which you must have found in some newspaper."

"Explain yourself, then."

"Willingly. When I left the train I went to look for my nephew, whom I found supping with some swells and singers at the Café Anglais. I was very hungry, and while I was taking supper one of the ladies present began talking of some story which she had seen in a newspaper, about a man in good society being arrested as he came from the church where he had just been married."

"Was the name given?"

"No; nor the church. This woman went on making her own comments; but nobody believed her. Guy told me that some newspaper writer or other, whom he knows, received an anonymous letter, which said about the same thing; but he did not think that it related to your daughter's marriage, and—"

"Guy is mistaken. The letter and the article were both aimed at me, and they told the truth. This Estelan has a warrant out against him. He is accused of having committed a theft ten years ago. Yesterday a detective came here—"

"And arrested your son-in-law."

"No; the scoundrel escaped. I insisted upon his killing himself, and offered him a pistol, but he preferred to run away."

"My dear friend, I see now that it is a serious matter. I won't waste time in trying to console you; but I beg you to believe that I am entirely at your orders. In such a case the devoted services of an old friend are

valuable. Tell me the whole affair. I may be able to give you some good advice, and, perhaps, some efficient help."

"Thanks. I know how kind you are, and how reliable, and I shall tell you all. See what trouble I am in!"

Maugars then briefly related all that had occurred on the day before, including the second visit paid him by the detective. Souscarrière listened attentively and feelingly until he had finished.

"So," said he, when the count ceased speaking, "your son-in-law has disappeared. Well, so much the better! But he is being looked for, and I fear that he may turn up again, and that must be prevented."

"How? And what good will it do?"

"If I knew where he was I would willingly help him to cross the frontier. He could go and get himself hanged somewhere else, and you would be rid of him."

"I should be none the less disgraced. If the law does not succeed in finding him he will be tried and convicted although absent, *in contumacium*, as they say. The detective did not hesitate to say so."

"However, I have a great mind to hunt him up, and challenge him to fight."

"That is a foolish plan."

"I have plenty of time to devote to looking for your rascal of a son-in-law."

"The police will find him before you do."

"That is by no means certain. The police have so many to look after, I should be running after a single fox. However, when the pack that are at his heels find him—if they do find him—and he is run down, you may rely upon your old comrade of the 3rd squadron in the First Chasseurs. I was the best shot in the regiment," resumed Souscarrière, "and I have been keeping up my practice, three hours a day, with my gamekeeper, who used to be a drillmaster in the Seventh Cuirassiers."

M. de Maugars began to pace the floor, and his frowning face showed his agitation. "Madeleine believes herself to be a widow," he said, suddenly stopping in front of his friend.

"Ah, you did not tell her that her husband survived his fall? Faith, you were right! She thinks that he fell accidentally, and does not know that he was accused of theft, I suppose?"

"No. I did not dare to tell her the truth."

"You were right. She has trouble enough. It would do no good to drive her to despair. I must start out to look for this man at once, for various reasons. You spoke, just now, of his being condemned in his absence. The dead are never convicted. The legal officials won't carry the matter any further when his death is proved. I shall surely shoot him if we fight a duel together. Besides, your daughter will think of marrying again, after a time. She must do so; and I want her to marry some one who will make her happy, and who has nothing to fear from the assize court."

"Really," said Maugars, "to hear you, one would think it the simplest thing in the world. You are dreaming, my poor Paul! Tell me how in the world could you find this man? Do you think that you could do more than the police? Did you learn how to do that sort of thing on your estate at La Bretèche?"

"I have a natural aptitude for tracking people. There wasn't my equal in Africa for hiding in ambuscade and surprising the Arabs."

"That is not the same thing at all," replied the count, shrugging his

shoulders. "You never saw Estelan, you do not know his habits, or whom he is acquainted with."

"But my nephew has seen him. He will help me; and as for the rest, you can tell me all about that. But where did you come across this man with a false name? Who introduced him to you? Whom did he visit in Paris?"

"Scarcely any one. He came from Mexico, with a recommendation to my cousin, the Baron de Neufgermain. It was at his house that I met him, and he was very highly thought of there."

"Neufgermain was taken in just as you were, that's clear, and it is scarcely likely that Estelan has sought refuge there. But he must have had some other acquaintances."

"He sometimes spoke of a very rich merchant with whom he had had dealings in Mexico, and who lives in Paris; but he did not introduce him to me, and I have forgotten his name. My lawyer, Pruneaux, knows it, however."

"Very good. I shall ask him what it is. But Estelan must have had his own notary."

"No; he went to mine and proved that he had about thirty thousand francs a year. He has taken the money and documents which he possessed with him, for he had the audacity to return home before he disappeared."

"Yes, he is a careful man, it seems. But too much caution is sometimes bad, and I shall find him, I tell you."

"You would fight with a thief, then?"

"I would fight with any man who injured my best friend. The rest of the business does not concern me. I don't care for the ugly story in the gentleman's past life. Besides, there are cases in which I would fight with a freed galley slave, and your son-in-law has not been convicted of crime, as yet, at all events."

"The detective even declared that he might be acquitted. But that does not change the present state of things in the least."

"Hum! if he were innocent by chance—but it seems impossible—we should feel sorry afterwards if we went too fast. But tell me how you came to let him have Madeleine. Were you in such a great hurry to marry her?"

"No," replied Maugars, greatly annoyed by the question. "But I am growing old. I shall be sixty next year. I may die when I least expect it. They may be sounding a muster in the skies, for almost all our comrades have left parade here below, you see. I thought that Madeleine would be left alone in the world if I died."

"Has she no relations, then, on her mother's side?"

"None whatever. So I was in haste to find a husband for her, who would take care of her when I died. Estelan came forward. He was a man of very attractive appearance, with an independent fortune, and very good manners.

"But, deuce take it, he fell from the clouds, as it were. His very name did not belong to him."

"It belonged to his maternal ancestors, and I am sure that he obtained a legal authorisation to bear it."

"Very well, let all that pass. I know that Parisian families act differently to provincial ones, who reflect for years before allowing a marriage to take place. Besides, I think that your choice was probably influenced

by the fact that your daughter was struck by Estelan's personal appearance. She loved him, did she not?"

"No. She did not dislike him, that is all, and when I proposed to her to marry him she made no objection."

"Indeed! I should not have thought her so submissive. She is not much like you in that."

"My dear friend, I made the mistake of bringing her up myself, and in habits of passive obedience. Madeleine has always yielded to me, from childhood until now. Unfortunately I have a temper which never gives way to anything."

"I know all about your temper. You are about as flexible as an iron bar."

"I am accustomed to rule, and I had not even given a thought to the true feelings of the poor girl who never opposed me. I said to her one day: 'I have found a husband for you. Monsieur d'Estelan suits me, and I am sure that he will make you happy. Will you marry him?' She replied that she would, and I asked no more. The match was made. I did it all. If I alone had to suffer the consequences of my mistake, I should not complain, but Madeleine—"

"Yes, she is the one to be pitied. She has married this man in obedience to you, and perhaps all the time she loved some one else instead."

"No."

"What do you know about it? Didn't you say, just now, that you never consulted her as to her feelings?"

"If she had had any lover I should have guessed it. Besides, who was there for her to love?"

"My nephew."

"Guy!"

"Why not? He is a very handsome young fellow. I do not undertake to say that he is a tempting son-in-law for a father. He gambles and leads a gay life, but he has good qualities which you know of as well as I. He is a man who never blanches in face of danger, and never trifles on points of honour. He is as firm and as upright as a lance, as true as steel itself. He has everything in his favour, so far as women are concerned."

"I don't dispute his merits," replied Maugars, impatiently. "But what are you aiming at with all this praise of a young man who, long ago, ceased visiting here?"

"I suspect that you did not try to prevent that, and I know, beyond a doubt, that he greatly admired your daughter."

"I never remarked it."

"A man of your disposition does not see anything but what he chooses to see. My dear Maugars, we may as well speak plainly, after all this. I have a question to ask you, and I wish you to give me a plain answer. Tell me why you chose a stranger for your son-in-law, when you had Guy de Bautru at hand, in love with Madeleine, and likely to be loved by her if you had not closed your doors against him? Now, don't speak of his being gay, and spending money, and all that! Guy suited you exactly, say what you will. On his father's side he is as well born as you are, and through his uncle, here present, he is rich. I should have secured all my money to his children. So you must have kept him at bay for other reasons, and I wish to know what they were. Come, speak out! Tell me exactly why you did not allow my nephew to pay his addresses to your daughter."

"Do you wish to know why? Well, then, listen to the story of my life."

"Your life!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "What has your life to do with my nephew? Deuce take it! I know all about your life."

"Not all," replied Maugars, gloomily.

"Yes I do, yes I do; except some love affairs about which you never spoke to me, probably because it wasn't worth while. I may have forgotten some of them, for you had so many. As for the rest, I know your whole story by heart, and unless you have committed some crime, and that I know you are incapable of—"

"Do you remember my first voyage to Louisiana?" interrupted the count.

"Do I remember it? I should say that I did! You went away in October, '59, the year of the Italian campaign. I went with you to Hâvre. You went abroad to get what was left you by an aunt, who had a splendid cotton plantation. As soon as your affairs in Louisiana were settled you returned to France."

"And I went back to New Orleans at the end of '62."

"Yes. But then I did not see you off. I was at La Bretèche when you suddenly made up your mind to cross the seas again; I never knew why, I'm sure."

"You shall hear. One year after, I wrote to you that I was going to be married, and had made up my mind to remain in the United States."

"News which I did not expect, and which greatly surprised me. You never seemed to me to be a marrying man; and to settle in the United States, in the very midst of the war there, was a strange thing for a gay Parisian to do. I wondered for a long time what your radical conversion meant. I finally concluded that love must be the cause. The explanation seemed unlikely to every one but me, but I knew you better. Although over forty you were still as young as at twenty-five. When I left Paris to settle down in the solitude of Anjou, you were in love with a married lady. I never knew how you got over that affair, for you were very much smitten. You went nowhere, and had deserted all your friends."

"It was to cut off that affair that I went away," said Maugars, curtly, seemingly vexed that Souscarrière should have reminded him of his transgression. "You never knew how I came to marry?"

"How could I have known? You remained away for five years without giving me any clue to your whereabouts, and you did not even answer my letters, so that I got tired of blackening paper to please you. That is a thing I always abhorred, and I gave up doing it about that time. I now never touch a pen except to sign a lease, or receipt a farmer's account. Finally, after your long silence, toward the beginning of '68, you wrote to me that you had just lost your wife, and that you were the father of a charming little girl. You said, besides, that you were preparing to return to France."

"You remember everything correctly. You might add that after my return you came three times to Paris—which you didn't like—expressly to see me, and that we renewed our former friendship; that you grew fond of Madeleine, and she of you."

"I am fond of her. She is a perfect creature, your dear little daughter, and I thought that she would be my niece some day; but I reckoned without this Monsieur d'Estelan and your capers."

"Listen to me, Souscarrière, and then blame me if you like. You

were right. I married for love. The young girl whom I married had no dowry but her beauty."

"Well, you were rich enough to please yourself in that way."

"She had no family, no name. She was called Elena, and that was all."

"And is that why you did not wish to let my nephew marry her daughter?"

"Yes. She is a creole. Many people object to creole women, where there is the slightest suspicion of mixed blood, however far back."

"Bah! I don't think that would have troubled Guy. Madeline is adorable, and on your side she has noble blood. The name of Maugars is enough. This excuse is a poor one."

"I returned to France, but two years later I resolved to go back, as I ardently desired to see my daughter, and the jealous husband whom you know about was annoying me; there seemed to be a likelihood of a tragic ending of the affair. Madeline was at an age when children begin to show intelligence, and my name was the first that she had uttered. I grew very fond of her. Elena idolised me, but when I returned here I did not believe that Guy, if he knew what her origin had been, would have been willing to marry her daughter. If I had allowed him to visit here, he would, however, have offered himself, knowing nothing of Madeline's origin on the mother's side. I should have been obliged to tell him everything, and then he would certainly have ceased his visits. I did not wish to expose myself to such an affront as that."

"But you thought that Estelan, being himself of humble origin, would be easier to manage respecting the question of birth than the last of the Bautrus?"

"I was right. Estelan saw the thing as I supposed he would. He took a philosophical view of it. That is not surprising, as it turns out."

"But you don't know that Guy would have acted as you say. He loved Madeline for her own sake."

"Why did he not speak out, then?" exclaimed Maugars, who was tired of repeating his reasons for acting as he had done.

"My dear friend, he is a true Bautru and proud, as proud as yourself. When he saw that you shut your door upon him, he did not try to get in at the window."

"Well, we will admit that I was wrong; but what good does it do to bring all that up now? My daughter is married, unluckily for herself and for me. I can't undo the marriage."

"Here, let me stop you and return to my proposal."

"Your proposal is absurd; I told you so before. You won't find Estelan, and if you did he would not fight with you. Such men don't fight."

"That remains to be seen. I am free to act as I please, and I know what I have to do. But what are your own plans?"

"I am going away."

"And, of course, you will take Madeline with you. Where will you go?"

"I thought at first of returning to Louisiana. Then I reflected that yellow fever was always very prevalent there. It does not attack creoles, but Madeline came to France so young that she is not acclimatised now. I shall travel in Europe, I will take her to Italy or Switzerland."

"It is not a very pleasant life for a man of your age and a young girl to go travelling about like that. You must settle down somewhere. Why not come to La Bretèche?"

"Where your nephew is ! At your house ?"

"My nephew, just now, has not the least desire to leave his rooms on the second floor in the Rue Auber. He is leading a very wild life."

"And you say that he is in love with Madeleine ?"

"That is why he is trying to forget her now. The poor fellow is squandering his money, casting it to the winds from the four corners of Paris. You have his ruin on your conscience, for if you had not sent him away he would have made an excellent husband. There is a chance yet, however, for I would remark to you that if your daughter has been lucky enough to really become a widow, she will not be able to do better than marry Guy."

"The devil take it ! You must have sworn to make me angry ! Why do you take pleasure in reminding me of the wretched situation in which she has been placed through my fault, as I candidly admit ? Why reason on mere conjecture ? You say that you will call out Estelan, and shoot him, most likely ; then you say that your nephew is in love with Madeleine. The next thing you will declare is that Madeleine is in love with him."

"That is what I mean to find out. Meantime, I can assure you that Guy is very much in love with her. I feel sure that she will be greatly grieved about her husband, although he is so unworthy of her, but she believes herself to be a widow, and it is only natural that she should remember a former suitor whom she received kindly at first."

"And whom you mean to recall to her recollection ?"

"Do you take me for a fool or for a scoundrel ? Do you suppose that I am going to unsettle her mind by proposing to her to marry my nephew while Estelan is still alive ? If she said 'yes,' we should be in a nice fix ! No, my dear friend, I wish to act with discretion, and what I propose is this : After what has taken place you cannot remain here, but I don't see why you should leave the country. Hire a house in the environs of Paris, a villa, and go there to-morrow. You need not receive any one but Guy and myself. There will be nothing improper in that, as regards Madeleine, for Guy knows how to act with proper discretion. He will be told that she is not a widow, and will behave accordingly."

"Good ! But what then ? I must come to something definite."

"You can do that in three months from now. I will give up my whole summer to you, and spend it in seeing this matter of your son-in-law to the end."

"Again ! There you go ! How you talk !"

"Oh, I am not so far wrong as you may think. I don't positively undertake to rid you of this unpleasant gentleman ; but I shall try to do so, and if I don't succeed I shall, at all events, make the situation clearer. If we acquire a certainty that the scamp is in foreign parts, you can certainly do nothing better than retire into the country with Madeleine, and I will undertake to find you some pretty spot near La Bretèche. It won't be very gay for your daughter, but Estelan will not live for ever. As for my nephew, he won't trouble you, for he will enlist in the Chasseurs d'Afrique before the year is out. Is it all settled, my good old Mangars?"

"Well, at all events, I must consult Madeleine," said the count, who had almost decided to yield the point.

"It is agreed then!" joyously exclaimed Souscarrière. "Madeleine will consent, I'll answer for it ! Take me to her and let me give the dear little girl a kiss, and when I have consoled her, breakfast is next in order. I have no end of things to attend to to-day."

IV.

THE second floor occupied by Guy de Bautru in the Rue Auber was dearer than any apartments on the first floor, would have been in a handsome house on the left bank of the Seine. Guy paid six thousand francs a year for the pleasure of being near the boulevard, at a cigar's length from his club, and within a gallop of the Champs Elysées. He was in the centre of his operations, and he declared that when cab-hire was considered—which would have been requisite two or three times a day, if he had lived any further from the boulevard—his rooms were really cheap.

He applied this faulty reasoning to a great many other modes of expenditure. From the price of a dinner at Bignon's he subtracted the expense of housekeeping which he saved by going to a restaurant for his meals. He even maintained that by deducting the losses, which persons who invest money inevitably meet with, by failures, falls on 'Change, and thieving cashiers who bolt with their employers' money, there was a great advantage in keeping his funds in a drawer from which he could take them whenever he needed to do so.

By dint of subtracting and reasoning in this way he had come to ruin; but he had done so without knowing it, which somewhat consoled him. Bautru belonged to that class of "high liver" who like to deceive themselves as to the end of the play in which they are acting a part, and who go gaily towards the precipice without caring about the final inevitable fall.

His famous suite of rooms was worth what he paid for it, however, for the apartments were large enough to have harboured a whole family. The windows were eight feet high and the ceilings were decorated with frescoes, and nothing was wanting in the kitchen for such cooking as a bachelor sometimes requires when he is entertaining friends, or in the dressing-room arranged on the English plan, in the bathroom duly provided with hot and cold water, or in the gallery full of rare bits of furniture and paintings—a miniature showroom, in fact. And—a final advantage which Guy highly appreciated—there was a stable where he kept his two saddle-horses, at one end of the court-yard. A man to groom them and a valet to wait upon him were all the servants he required. The valet smoked his cigars, but he was unparalleled in getting rid of a bore.

After ten o'clock one evening, about a week after Madeleine de Maugars' wedding, Bautru found himself at home by chance, for he had not gone there to sleep. He ordered all the rooms to be brilliantly lighted up, and walked up and down them with a greatly excited air. Then, after a long stay in the bathroom and the dressing-room, he repaired to the gallery and began to review all the curiosities with which he had filled it at great expense.

He only cared for ceramics because other people did, and as a sacrifice to the prevailing taste. He had, indeed, no enthusiasm whatever as regarded either *faiience* or porcelain, nor did he rave about pictures. A few bits of Delft, some Japanese vases, and a small number of pictures by Saxe, Ziem, and Diaz, with a fine Fromentin made up his collection, so far as pottery and painting were concerned. But he had a passion for antique arms, and weapons of various kinds hung everywhere. They were both

offensive and defensive ones, including Persian scimitars and helmets of the Middle Ages, arquebuses of the *Renaissance*, Malay kresses, and Circassian coats-of-mail and cross-belts of the time of Louis XIII.—indeed, nothing was wanting, not even court-swords to be worn at the side. There was also a perfect museum of firearms of various sorts ; and Guy, in his dressing-gown and slippers, examined his panoplies, seemingly looking for some weapon which he needed. After some hesitation he finished by taking down a sword of Italian make, a long rapier, which must have slashed the calves of some sixteenth-century reiter, and, holding it horizontally, he began to measure it with his eye.

His uncle, bursting in like a whirlwind, found him engaged in this interesting occupation.

"Zounds ! " exclaimed the ex-commander of the Third Squadron of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, "I did right to come upstairs since I find you here. I saw a light in your windows, and I came up at all hazards. I have just returned from Vésinet. I have a great many things to tell you, but I did not know where to look for you. By what chance are you here at home when most fellows of your sort are showing off their collars to the women at the circus ? "

"I came home to dress," said Guy, quietly.

"And what do you intend to do with this toy that you are holding, as if you were going to spit a chicken with it ? Have you a duel on hand ? I shall be vexed if it is so, for this is not the time for one."

"No, I am going to a ball in the costume of a nobleman of the court of Charles IX., and as this sword belongs to that period—"

"What ! a fancy ball in the summer ? "

"That's the height of the fashion. Don't you ever read the papers ? "

"Yes, sometimes. I remember reading the description of a ball where—"

"Well, then, citizens' wives imitate princesses," interrupted Guy, "and I am invited to one which the wife of an arch-millionaire is giving at her house. They are people who have got rich all at once."

"That doesn't surprise me at all. What surprises me is that you should feel inclined for dancing. You have made up your mind, then, to go to this ball ? "

"Yes. It will be a curious sight. Busserolles made them send me an invitation, and I promised him that I would go."

"At what time ? "

"At midnight—not before."

"We shall have time for a little talk, then. Let us go into another room. Here I am afraid to stir, for fear of breaking some of your *bric-à-brac*."

"You will have plenty of space in my dressing-room," replied Bautru, laughing. "I admit that your dimensions are somewhat cramped here."

"Ah ! those are your tinsel rags," grumbled Souscarrière, seeing his nephew's fancy costume lying upon a sofa. "A short cloak, a cap, a doublet and tights. You will be all silk and velvet. Why the deuce did you choose that disguise ? "

"Because I wear a pointed beard and short hair as were worn at the Louvre under Charles IX., and as I did not care to wear a wig. I took the period which suits my face the best."

"A cap, a military jacket, and red pants will suit you a great deal better six months' hence, or even sooner, for at this rate you will not keep

up appearances for six months; you must have at least ten thousand francs' worth of furniture and objects of art here."

"Twenty thousand, uncle."

"It is shameful! Let us talk of something else. I told you that I came from Vésinet. Maugars has found a house there in the midst of a nice-looking garden. He has hired it furnished. He only had to take his night-cap there, and he went yesterday. I spent the day with him."

"And his daughter, of course?"

"Yes. They expect us to dinner to-morrow."

A pause now ensued. Guy, who was twisting a cigarette and humming a hunting song, made no haste to reply.

"You will come, I hope," said his uncle, frowning.

"I don't think that I shall," replied Bautru, indifferently.

"What! you refuse to visit Maugars after the misfortune he has met with? Maugars, my old comrade, my only friend! You ought to have called there the day after this affair occurred."

"I am sure that he would not have received me."

"You are mistaken. He likes you just as he did formerly. You may say that he was rude to you last winter, but he had excellent reasons for what he did, you will admit that yourself. These reasons no longer exist. You made love to his daughter, and were leading a very fast life at the time. You ought to have given up one or the other, my lad! Blame yourself if he found another husband for Madeleine."

"He made a pretty choice," muttered Bautru.

"The mischief take it! he didn't, and poor Madeleine is in a most miserable plight, and doesn't yet know the full extent of her misfortune. Maugars, as I told you, has allowed her to think that she is a widow, but her fate is linked to that of a rascal as long as that rascal lives. This is no time to desert her. You loved her once, whatever you may say to the contrary, and I know, beyond a doubt, that she liked you very much. It is a pity you did not marry her, but that needn't prevent you from showing her some friendliness."

"I deeply sympathise with her sorrows, but I prefer not to see her."

"You prefer to go to balls and sup with singers? Paris has decidedly spoilt you, my lad."

"Less than you think, uncle. Shall I tell you why I don't wish to go to Monsieur de Maugars' house!"

"That is exactly what I want to know."

"Well, then, it is because I was very much attached to his daughter. If I were like many young men, I shoul'dn't need to be urged to resume my romance where I left off. Mademoiselle de Maugars is no longer a young girl, as she has a husband. In attempting to please her, I should not offend morals as they go nowadays. But I don't govern myself according to those views, and I should act extremely badly if I did not maintain the strictest reserve towards her at this time."

"Who wants you to do anything else?" replied Souscarrière, gnawing the end of his moustache.

Guy had just touched the delicate point in his uncle's plans. However, Souscarrière resumed:

"Can't you go to call at Maugars' without behaving like a libertine? Madeleine is a virtuous girl, and I am sure that you are a gentleman. Treat her simply as a friend."

"Do you think that so easy? Come now, uncle, you said just now that

once I loved her. Well, I don't deny it, and I will even confess that I am not sure that I am cured of my unlucky passion. The fire is smouldering, and I don't wish to rekindle it."

"Then if Madeleine were a widow, you would willingly marry her?"

"No doubt. But she is not a widow."

"My dear boy, everything comes round in the course of time. Estelan may be dead by this time. A man can't leap from a second-floor window without being injured, and if he is alive he may kill himself to escape the police, who are after him."

"Such men don't kill themselves," replied Bautru, contemptuously. "If he had any blood in his veins he would have begun by that."

"I confess that I don't expect that termination of the matter, which would be a great relief to more than one of us. But let us say no more about it. You have no right, happen what may, to repel Maugars' advances, and you will pain me very much if you persist in so doing. Just reflect that this worthy fellow and his daughter are condemned to isolation for many years. Maugars has had it spread about that he was going to Italy, but he confines himself for the present to the most retired part of Vésinet. He does not receive any one but the old marchioness, who does not make a very good consoler, for she unceasingly reproaches him with having accepted Estelan, whom she did everything in her power, she says, to discourage. I hope that I shall be able to persuade him to buy some land in our part of the country, and come there to end his days with Madeline. In that way you would be obliged to see them, sooner or later. It had better be now, and I rely upon your going with me to-morrow to their house."

"Well, if you require it, uncle," replied Bautru, attempting to look perfectly indifferent, "I will renew the connection which I wished to forget, but only on condition that nothing more shall be said as to the past, and that I shall hold you responsible for the consequences," he added, gaily. "I may fall in love again and break my heart."

"Well and good!" exclaimed Souscarriere. "Be at the Saint-Lazare station to-morrow, so as to take the train which starts at 5.35. I will undertake to make your peace with Maugars, and you will see that all will go smoothly after that."

The stubborn ex-colonel held on to his plan, but he kept that plan to himself. He did not think fit to tell his nephew that he hoped to get rid of Estelan by a dexterous sword-thrust in a duel.

"Now that I have brought you round," said he, "I don't wish to prevent you from disguising yourself, and making yourself look like Comminges in the 'Pic aux Clercs.' This costume ought to suit you very well. Is your merchant's wife a fashionable woman?"

"She is a person who goes into all kinds of society, I hear. This is the first time that I have ever been invited to her house. Her husband made an immense fortune in selling something or other, and in these times he is a big man. The ball will be at a superb house on the Boulevard de Montmorency, at Auteuil."

"The Boulevard de Montmorency? Indeed! that's strange!"

"Why?"

"Nothing. But I heard of some one to-day who lives there, and whom I shall be obliged to see very soon. What is your millionaire's name?"

"Madame Aubijoux. It is not a stylish name, by any means."

"Aubijoux!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "Her husband is a weaver, a manufacturer, and a commission-merchant besides."

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"No, but I mean to make his acquaintance to-night. You must introduce me."

"What! do you mean to go to the ball?"

"Why not? Do you imagine that I have been out of society so long that I don't know how to conduct myself?"

"No, but this is a fancy-ball."

"Well, I'll hire a costume."

"You won't be able to find one. The carnival is over."

"You have got one."

"Yes, but I ordered mine a week ago of Delphine Baron, and I had a great deal of trouble to get it. She cannot supply the demand since masquerades and 'cavalcades' became fashionable again."

"That's all very well, but you can't make me believe that by going to the shops and clothes-dealers—"

"They are shut up. It is half-past eleven, my dear uncle. And, besides, you would find nothing but trash. You haven't any desire to appear as a Spaniard of the Cortilla, I suppose?"

"A troubadour, anything, I don't care, as long as I go to Madame Aubijoux's ball."

"May I be permitted to ask why you so particularly wish to go?"

"Oh, I may as well tell you," replied Souscarrière, after a moment's thought. "You know that this rascally Estelan has vanished, and that the police are looking for him, but have not yet found him!"

"Yes; but what has that to do with—?"

"You will see. I am looking for Estelan as well."

"You, uncle?"

"Yes. Maugars wishes to know what has become of his good-for-nothing son-in-law. If he is dead, his death must be proved to make Madeleine free. If he is alive, Maugars particularly desires that he may disappear for ever, and I want to bring this about."

"How?"

"By getting the scamp off to America, or China, and making him promise never to set his feet in France again."

"That is a strange idea of yours, allow me to say."

"Strange or not, I mean to carry it out, and as I have so determined, I am taking every means to accomplish it. I at once began by inquiring who Estelan knew here in Paris."

"He did not know any one, I believe, but the Neufgermains."

"He knew them very slightly. He handed them some letter, when he came here, from a ruined gentleman whom he had met in Mexico."

"And it was upon the strength of that recommendation that they introduced him to Monsieur de Maugars? What kind of behaviour do you call that?"

"Neufgermain is a curmudgeon and a fool. His wife is envious and spiteful. I told them what I thought of them, but I saw at once that they would not give me any useful information, and so I went elsewhere to get it. I knew that Estelan had mentioned an individual to Monsieur de Maugars' notary, and I went at once to ask him the name of the man. Between ourselves, that Pruneaux is an odd sort of fellow. I went six times to his office before I could find him. He was always out. However,

at last, this morning, I succeeded in finding him. He was showing out—well, who do you think? Why, that singer who took supper with us the night that I arrived here."

"What! Rosine?"

"No, not that one; the other—the one who sang in a cracked voice, and called me a general."

"Ah, Antonia. Well, there's nothing very surprising in that. She probably has some money to invest, and is less of a 'grasshopper' than is supposed."

"Perhaps so, but no matter. Pruneaux began, of course, by regretting the unfortunate occurrence which had taken place, which was 'so painful,' etc., etc.; but I cut him short, and asked him who gave him such a clear account of Estelan. He immediately replied that it was Monsieur Aubijoux, and did not fail to deny all responsibility in the matter; he highly praised the honesty of this very wealthy merchant, who had himself been deceived, he said, for he was incapable of countenancing a man of bad character. I did not stop to hear any more, for I had all I wanted, and I went off. The only thing now was to get at Aubijoux, so as to question him about Estelan. But this was rather difficult. It appears that this nabob has 'audiences,' like a minister of state. You must send in your name several days beforehand so as to get an interview. Besides, there were chances of a cold reception. I know my own temper, and I should have broken out if he had put on any airs, and in that way I shouldn't have learnt anything. But by presenting myself in the midst of a ball given by him, and by dexterously questioning him——"

"But I can't introduce you to him, for I never saw him in my life."

"You will meet people there who know him, and—by the way, there's your friend Busserolles."

"Oh, all my club friends will be there; and as for introducing you, there's no difficulty about that, although you have no invitation. I think that they are not very particular at that house."

"Well, then?"

"The costume is the difficulty."

"Zounds! I had forgotten that. Are you all obliged to be in fancy dress?"

"Absolutely. Not even a Venetian cloak will be let in, as it might cover modern evening dress."

"The devil take the crazy-headed woman! Come, now, Guy, haven't you got anything that would do for me? You must have been to the Opera ball this winter."

"Yes; but I wore a dress suit," said Bautru, laughing. "Did you suppose that I went as a clown?"

"We used to go in fancy costume in my time," said Souscarrière. "You must dress me up as a magician, a monk, a Turk, I tell you, or no matter how. I shan't stir till I am disguised in some way or another."

"I solemnly declare that I have not a spangled robe, a gown, or any loose trousers; but I might lend you one of the coats of mail in my collection."

"Armour!—that's a good idea! Let us see your collection!" exclaimed Souscarrière, going towards the gallery, followed by Guy, who was laughing heartily.

"Here is just what I want," said the colonel, placing his muscular

hand upon the shoulder of a suit of armor, complete from head to foot, which stood upon a pedestal in the midst of the museum.

"What! Would you——"

"Would I? Yes, I would. This helmet and cuirass will suit me exactly. I know how to wear them, I'll wager! I served a year in the Second Carabiniers when I came back from Africa."

"The fact is, that you are exactly the height to wear the trappings of Henri III. and his knights. He was over six feet tall, they say."

"I am five feet eleven; but no matter. Everything is here, armlets, cuirasses, jambiers, and gauntlets."

"Do you mean to carry the lance?"

"Are you laughing at me, master nephew? You will see the effect that I shall produce among the consumptive young striplings of the present day."

"Oh, the effect will be prodigious! But it remains to be seen whether you will be able to walk with this carapace upon you."

"Walk? I could fly! Ring for your servant and tell him to bring all this iron into your bedroom. I shall take less time to put it on than you to get into your courtier's dress. It isn't midnight yet. Let me go into your dressing-room. I will smoke the stirrup-cigar, so to say, while you begin your toilet."

Guy did not attempt to contradict his uncle. He gave his orders to Francois, and went to join the colonel, whom he found seated in a huge leather-covered arm-chair. Uncle Souscarrière's strange fancy amused him so much that it made him forget for a time the threatened trip to Vésinet, which did not please him at all.

However, his persevering uncle immediately returned to the subject of his friend Maugars' mishaps. "Your Paris is a city to fly from," said he. "Nothing is talked of but last week's scandal. The papers are full of it. Last night they were calling out on the boulevards, 'The affair of La Trinité, one sou.' It is disgusting. You know some of these newspaper men, don't you? Didn't you tell me that on the evening of the marriage, one of these scribblers received an anonymous letter, telling him of Maugars' son-in-law's arrest?"

"He showed it to me, but he did not publish it. He gave it to me, and I have it. Unfortunately, the other papers received similar letters, and that is what has spread the story."

"Yes; for the police would have kept quiet about it. The detective said so to Maugars. This is what the press is intended for, it seems."

"The press did its duty, which is to keep the public informed of what is going on. Besides, whether the papers published it or not it would have got about, for the count's servants would have talked. But I wonder who the man can be who set it going? Some enemy of Estelan's, no doubt; some wretch who knows his past, and has uselessly tried to blackmail him."

"Perhaps so," said Souscarrière, thoughtfully, "but I think that the blow comes from some enemy of Maugars, and when I say 'blow,' I mean the two letters sent to the police, several months apart. The letter to the papers was only an accessory act of spite."

"Has Monsieur de Maugars any enemies?"

"Everybody has enemies, and by living as he used to live he must have made several. Maugars has had three periods in his life. He began by being an excellent soldier, and has ended by becoming a good father;

but between thirty and forty he was a great hunter of forbidden game. I should not be surprised if one of the husbands whom he angered had resorted to this revenge."

"After the lapse of twenty years? That isn't likely."

"Some never forget."

"But this is attacking the daughter to get at the father."

"Remark that the fellow who pointed out Estelan to the police could have done so earlier, for he evidently knew where Estelan was and what he did, but he preferred to denounce him on the very day when the scamp had married Madeleine at the municipal office. The thrust was at Maugars himself, you see."

"You may be right. I did not think of that, and it seems to me that if this is the case, Monsieur de Maugars ought to be able to find this enemy who is hiding himself, and who, perhaps, doesn't yet consider himself sufficiently avenged."

"He ought, indeed, to know him, and if I could do my old comrade the service of discovering the mysterious scoundrel, I——"

"I would willingly undertake the matter. The letter which I have kept must be in his handwriting, and by keeping a sharp look-out——"

"True! a happy thought! You know a great many people, and chance may put you upon the track of this anonymous writer. I must ask Maugars if he knows what became of the people who were likely to have a spite against him. There must be a long list. But no matter. Work on your side and I will work on mine. I will hunt up Estelan while you hunt up the letter-writer, and, as things now stand, you can make inquiries among your friends."

"I see but one who can give me any good advice, and who, at the same time, has sufficient knowledge of society to be useful to me."

"Who is that? Monsieur Busserolles?"

"No. Busserolles merely troubles himself about his own real or spurious love-affairs. But I know a sensible man who has always been very friendly to me, and I think that I shall meet him to-night at Madame Aubijoux's ball, for he is somewhat intimate with her husband."

"The deuce he is! that is exactly what we want. You must consult him, and introduce him to me. I must go to the ball to do all this, and it is now time to put on my armour while you put on your tights. Send for a cab. If I walked in my suit of mail I should be taken to the station-house."

"Don't be alarmed, uncle," replied Bautru, "I have ordered a carriage. I don't answer for your being comfortable in it, but an armed knight is utterly indifferent to comfort. My servant will help you to buckle your corslet, and in an hour from now we shall be at the house of mine host of the Boulevard Montmorency, making a triumphal entrance."

V.

THE stately houses in the Faubourg Saint-Germain are disappearing, one after another, to make room for wide macadamised roads. The tramways run across their open frontings, and the old trees of their vast gardens have fallen under the woodman's axe. The escutcheons of sculptured stone on such doorkeepers' lodges which still remain standing, attest the

vanished splendours of a glorious past ; but the high windows have gone, and grass is growing between the bricks in the silent courtyards.

Old aristocrats have vanished, and modern aristocracy scorns these gloomy streets. Paris, like London, Vienna, and Berlin, is stretching towards the west. It would seem as though all great capitals followed the course of the sun. Rich and influential families no longer confine themselves to dull quarters. They require air, grass, and flowers. Their palaces have become villas ; and they are not wrong in making the change. What a marvellous horizon extends in front of the pretty houses in the Boulevard Montmorency ! In the foreground the green foliage of the Bois de Boulogne can be seen, and in the background, Mont Valérien stands out at the hour of sunset against a sky of purple and gold. There are the fortifications, to be sure, which interfere somewhat with the picture, and the Auteuil railway, with its noisy locomotives, is too near ; but from the Italian terraces facing the white houses the eye reaches beyond the ramparts, and in the shady groves around the steam-whistle is scarcely heard.

M. Jean Aubijoux, the lord over many millions—a merchant prince, as the English say—had built himself a château—a real château in the midst of a real park, full of trees brought from afar by the new process and transplanted on the new plan. He did not live there, and did not, perhaps, enjoy being there, for his tastes were not rural, and his interests frequently obliged him to be absent. Two important factories to manage in the North ; an immense export business to direct ; the despatch of goods to Brazil, Mexico, and the United States, occupied him entirely.

This self-made man understood life to be the pursuit of wealth. He was not avaricious, and despised money, but obeyed that law of nature which urges aunts and merchants to constant toil. He was a money-making man, just as others are money-spending men. He laughed when his well-filled coffers were alluded to, and he never minded crossing the ocean although he was forty years old. He had gone back and forward nineteen times.

How he had found time to marry was what his friends could not guess. He had married, however, at thirty, and in haste, between two trips. His wife was a poor girl, of good family, whom he had met at a house where he did not visit more than three times in the course of a whole season. Léonie Chevry was twenty, and dowerless, with a pretty figure, a pleasing face, and light chestnut hair. She had charmed him at first sight, and he could not tell why. Busy men often have such whims. He married her as soon as the wedding could possibly take place. He was already rich. Léonie was desirous of marrying a wealthy man, and her father, an egotistical old widower, who was living on his money, was only too glad to marry her off, and live in his own way. So Jean Aubijoux was accepted without demur.

The marriage had turned out very well. Léonie was not in love with her lord and master, but she appreciated his good qualities, especially that which enabled her to satisfy her luxurious tastes and love of worldly pleasure. M. Aubijoux gave her all the money that she wanted. His cash-box was always open to her, and she drew from it large supplies. She rewarded him for his generosity by conducting herself so that she had never been talked about at all, although her husband's frequent absences left her in complete freedom. She made up for thus abstaining from all flirtation by going everywhere under the protection of a com-

panion. She went with her to balls, to theatres, and to the Bois de Boulogne, dragging after her a swarm of admirers, whom she never allowed to approach her on any other footing than that of formal acquaintance.

She had said one day that she would like to own a princely establishment. M. Aubijoux struck the ground with his fairy wand of gold, and from the soil between La Muette and the Porte d'Auteuil a royal residence at once arose. Her husband had taken great pleasure in thus gratifying her wishes. The worthy dealer was not displeased to imitate the great noblemen of the old *régime*. The Duke d'Antin caused all the trees of an avenue in his park at Petit Bourg to be cut down in one night, because they hid the view when Louis XIV was his guest. Aubijoux, in one month, had caused a forest to be transplanted to please his wife.

Léonie had, indeed, only to express a wish, and lately she had taken it into her head to give a ball, which should be different from most entertainments of the kind. It was to be a fancy-dress ball, to which all stylish persons should be admitted, without reference to their family or even to their social positions, so long as they were respectable.

Her husband, who had just arrived from Rio Janeiro, and was expecting to start again for New York in August, was delighted with the prospect of seeing several nationalities dancing in his rooms before he started on another long trip, and so on the morrow of her request six hundred invitations were sent out, which admitted of bringing a friend with one, and that friend even a woman, providing she were respectable. The foreign colony residing around the Arc de Triomphe, and the gayest of the gay in the fashionable world of Paris, had made haste to answer this tempting call, so that the ball promised to be a brilliant affair.

The house was dazzlingly illuminated, and the electric light streamed over the thick foliage of the park. The night was superb, the sky extremely clear, without a cloud upon its surface; and the air remarkably soft and balmy. Beyond the wide entrance gate there stretched an avenue of elms fifty years old, and on the right and left of these transplanted trees a lawn extended to a coppice. In front of the entrance swarms of footmen, whose liveries were covered with gold lace, were standing to receive the visitors, and the whole scene resembled some fairy spectacle at a theatre, such was its glitter and glare.

"This is simply superb!" exclaimed Souscarrière, as the hired carriage which was conveying his nephew and himself stopped in front of this gorgeous entrance. "I have never seen anything to equal it since the ball at the Tuilleries during the Exhibition in '67. All that is wanting is the Imperial body-guard. Your Monsieur Aubijoux must have found a diamond mine, or a petroleum field. I am curious to see him, and still more desirous to find some one to introduce me to him. He lives like a nabob."

"Let us get out, uncle," said Bautru. "Let me help you."

"What do you take me for? Your armour is not more than a feather to me. The jambiers feel a little tight at the knee, but they will soon loosen, you'll see."

Guy had already alighted, and was ready to hold out his hand to help the armed knight. Souscarrière, however, was far too proud to allow his nephew to give him the least assistance in getting out of the carriage, in which he had been far from comfortable.

The appearance of the giant clad in mail produced an immense effect. The servants were wonderstruck, and such guests as had not yet crossed

the threshold of the vestibule turned round in astonishment to gaze at the new-comer, who looked not unlike the statue of the *commendatore* in the opera of *Don Giovanni*. Souscarrière was not a man to let this scrutiny trouble him. Straight and stiff in his steel shell he walked up the steps with his helmet's visor raised.

Guy, in his silken doublet, looked like his uncle's page, and his costume was a perfect success. He indeed admirably portrayed the elegant noble of the time of Charles IX. His delicate features and proud carriage would certainly have won him the admiration of the court of Catherine de Medicis, and he looked so much like M. de la Mole that had the Queen of Navarre been there she would have taken him for that gentleman of courtly fame and winning grace.

He soon fell in with a group of his comrades, who were standing outside the first room, and who recognised him at once. Busserolles was dressed as Artagnan; Girac, as a hussar of the First Empire, covered with braid and embroidery; and Rangouze as an Incroyable under the Directory. Still, however well they were got up, their appearance by no means equalled that of the uncle and the nephew. Souscarrière, who was surrounded and applauded on every hand, did not know what to reply.

"You ought to be sculptured, sir; I congratulate you on your appearance," said Busserolles.

"Your outfit is imposing, but I should think that it must be rather heavy," sneered Girac.

"Now, this is the kind of warrior that I admire," exclaimed Rangouze.
"There are none of them to be had nowadays."

"Young gentlemen," quietly remarked the ex-chasseur d'Afrique, "I don't object to be admired, but I do object to being quizzed. I borrowed a helmet and a cuirass from my nephew because the idea came into my head to attend this ball, and that was only a couple of hours ago. If my iron-work does not suit you, you can come and tell me so to-morrow at the Grand Hôtel, and we will settle it with swords or pistols, as you like. My room is on the fourth floor, but there's an elevator. To-night, silence in the ranks. Those are my orders."

This address produced an excellent effect. The dazzling hussar became as solemn as a judge, the Directory dandy almost disappeared into his neckcloth, and Busserolles' tune changed in a trice. "I declare to you, sir," said he in the most courteous tone imaginable, "that none of us would attempt to quiz our friend Bautru's uncle. For my part, I solicit the honour of introducing you to Madame Aubijoux, for Guy, if I am not mistaken, does not know her any more than you do."

"Upon my word, you are right," said Guy, "and I do not know why she invited me."

"I have often talked about you to her," replied Busserolles, twirling his moustache with a lady-killing air.

"She has invited all Paris," remarked Girac.

"Very good," said Souscarrière, "but you must introduce me to her husband also, my dear Monsieur Busserolles."

"That will be more difficult, for I don't know him. He does not care much, I believe, to know his guests, and he lets his wife do the receiving."

"But he must be here, of course!"

"Yes, after looking everywhere we may perhaps find him in some distant room or some corner of the garden. I saw him just now talking to Pruneaux, but they have both of them vanished."

"Pruneaux, the notary?"

"Yes. He is dressed as a Turk."

"And Aubijoux as Molieré's 'Bourgeois Gentilhomme.' They might give as much amusement, by playing their parts, as at the Comédie Française. Just now they are taking the air in the park."

"I don't need any one, then," said Souscarrière, "for Pruneaux will introduce me to Monsieur Aubijoux."

"Meantime, uncle, we had better go to pay our respects to Madame Aubijoux. Show us the way, Busserolles. Where is she to be found?"

"In the front room, behind that screen of flowers, and if Monsieur Souscarrière will follow me we shall find her at once."

A clump of rare exotic plants concealed the splendour of the room from those who were standing in the vestibule. Busserolles made ready to guide the uncle and nephew, but Souscarrière had changed his mind.

"Did you say that Pruneaux had gone out with the lord of all he surveys?" he asked of Rangouze.

"Yes, sir; I know where they are, and I shall be happy to take you to them."

"I will go there, then. When you have seen enough of the ladies, Guy, you will find me under the trees. It must be suffocating in the ball-room, and my head-piece would give the dancers a chill. I had rather go outside to draw breath."

This plan suited Bautru, who did not at all care to show himself in company with his helmeted uncle. So he let him go off with Rangouze. They passed down a hall filled with shrubs and flowers, and he entered the ball-room with the gaily attired Busserolles. At the end of an oval apartment leading to an immense gallery stood a tall, slender blonde, sparkling with diamonds, and dressed as the Queen of Cyprus, with a gold-embroidered robe and a diadem.

"That is the lady," said Busserolles; "what do you think of her?"

"I will tell you after I have talked to her. At this distance I can only see the glitter of her jewels, which fairly dazzle my eyes," replied Bautru in the same low tone in which his friend had spoken.

The lady had caught sight of them, and to Guy's utter astonishment she came towards them, instead of waiting for them to approach. Busserolles was already assuming airs on the strength of this mark of favour, when her words abruptly took down his conceit.

"You have brought Monsieur de Bautru to introduce him to me," said she at once. "I cannot thank you enough for bringing him to me."

"Madame," began Guy, "I am the one to feel grateful—"

He stopped short, and the usual compliment did not come, for Madame Aubijoux's voice had suddenly brought a recollection to his mind which startled him. Busserolles, surprised at not being called upon to tell his friend's name, looked rather abashed and felt so. He passed on, after making a bow.

Bautru was about to follow him, but Madame Aubijoux touched his arm, which was as much to say, "remain," and so he stood still, waiting. "I did not think that you would come," said she. "I was very anxious to thank you for the service you rendered me." And, as Guy did not reply, she resumed, with a smile: "You have already forgotten, then, that you saved me from a very great danger? Had you not come so bravely to defend me, I do not know how my adventure might have ended."

This time Bantru understood her. "Was it you, madame, whom I——"

"It was I. At Mabille! It is absurd, is it not? I ought to be ashamed to confess it, but I would rather do that than deprive myself of the pleasure of thanking you, and it was in order to do so that I invited you. Was I wrong?"

"I was wrong in not recognising your voice and figure, and I assure you, madame——"

"Do not assure me of anything. We do not need to assure one another of anything as yet, and your friend is looking at us. You had better join him."

"May I hope to see you again to-night?"

"You may," said the Queen of Cyprus, raising her large blue eyes to Guy's.

He was about to ask when he should see her, but she left him and joined two ladies, one attired as a Neapolitan woman and the other as a Diana of Poitiers, who had just emerged from behind the screen of flowers, which masked the door.

The audience was over, and Bautru passed on. Busserolles, who was waiting for him, did not lose a moment in questioning him: "So you know her?" he said, eagerly.

"Not at all."

"Oh, don't make a mystery of it. She did not give me time to introduce you, and she called you by name."

"Because you had spoken of me. That is what she was telling me while you were taking Othello-like attitudes, which don't in the least suit your musketeer's uniform. It is my turn to ask you: 'Do you know her?'"

"I do know her, slightly."

"A little, or a great deal, as you talk so freely with her about your friends."

"That shows that I am not jealous of them."

"Jealous! Why, how far does your intimacy go? Never mind! She is charming. Her eyes are brighter than her diamonds. But take me about, will you? You are used to coming here, I see."

Busserolles, despite his vexation, now led his friend from one gay scene to another. The great gallery was dazzling with gold, light, and diamonds. No one was dancing as yet, and the lady guests formed wonderfully beautiful groups. Nymphs with golden hair, dark gipsies, sultanas, and duchesses of the time of Louis XV., were standing side by side. Minerva, Madame de Maintenon, Diana, and Marie Antoinette, formed another group; while "Winter-nights," "Summer-nights," "Starry-nights," and "Venetian-nights," made a third.

Who were all these people? Bantru, who went into society a great deal, could not place them. They were absolutely unknown to him. There were fewer men than women, and those whom Guy recognised as he passed were among the gayest men in Paris. The rest of the male guests belonged to the higher merchant circles, like the lord of the château himself, and Bautru cared very little whence they came. He had come to the ball merely to drive away the gloomy thoughts which had annoyed him for several days, and yet he did not succeed in doing so. In the midst of all the glitter around him he was thinking how sad Madeleine de Mangars must be. Madame Aubijoux's singular reception had diverted his thoughts for a moment, but now the recollection of Madeleine again took possession of his mind.

Little by little, too, he had again begun to think of his uncle's plans, and he asked himself what would result from the interview with M. Aubijoux. He expected no good result whatever, and was amused by the confidence which the old soldier displayed in relying upon obtaining information about Estelan from a simple-minded merchant. He was still pondering thus, when, at the end of the gallery, as he reached a room which communicated with the garden, he suddenly found himself face to face with Frédoc, disguised as an old peasant of Brittany, his costume being such as was worn under the reign of Louis XIV.

"Good evening, my dear friend," said Guy, shaking hands with him; "I am delighted to meet you. I was looking for you."

"Did you know I was coming to this ball, then?"

"Yes; Busserolles told me so."

"It is really folly, at my age, and a week ago I had no idea of going to a fancy-dress ball at all. But Aubijoux urged me so much to accept his wife's invitation that I did not dare refuse."

"Is Monsieur Aubijoux one of your friends?"

"That would be saying too much, but I often see him. I have an interest in his business. I am glad that I came, for these superb rooms and dazzling women make one feel as young as ever."

"The ball is a success, but it is too warm here, and I should like to get a breath of air. Will you come with me into the garden?"

"Oh, willingly! It is admirably laid out. I will show you about. Will you come with us, Busserolles?"

"Thanks. I prefer to waltz," replied Busserolles, who was not sorry to get rid of Bautru, as he wished to flutter about the Queen of Cyprus once more.

"Then I hope that you will enjoy yourself," said Guy, who was glad to be left free to talk privately with Frédoc. They passed behind the orchestra-stand, which was hidden by flowers, and in the rear of the musicians they found a door adorned with green garlands. They passed through this triumphal arch, as it were, into the park which they found to be so splendidly illuminated that it was as light as day.

"We have not seen one another for an age," said Frédoc, in a friendly tone. "I have been somewhat indisposed, and have not been to the club for a week. It is true that I heard of you, but the news was not good. I was told that you were fleeced by that Brazilian at cards—"

"Yes, and for a large amount. I lost a thousand napoleons."

"I advised you to keep away."

"I ought to have listened to you. But I was destined to rush to ruin."

"I trust that it is not so bad as that, but if you need any money I hope that you will come to me."

"Thanks, my dear Frédoc, I thought of you at first, but Rangouze told me of a money-lender who got me out of my scrape."

"Rangouze is very obliging, but the service he did you must have cost you dear."

"Forty per cent., or thereabouts, and I signed a note at thirty days; but before the month is up I shall be able to meet it."

"You would have done better to have gone to supper when you left Mabille."

"Speaking of Mabille," said Bautru, delighted at the opportunity of changing the subject, "do you remember the letter which I showed you, a letter addressed to the paper that Métel works for."

"Yes, and I have been grieved to hear that the story is true. I do not really know what to think of such a deplorable affair."

"It is all the more deplorable as Estelan is not dead as was thought at first. He will undoubtedly be arrested, tried, and convicted, and the affair will make a terrible stir, and disgrace Monsieur de Maugars."

"I fear that it will, and I pity the count with all my heart. You have no doubt seen him since all this occurred. How does he bear his misfortunes?"

"He does not bear them at all. He talks of blowing out his brains, and I am afraid that he will really do so if his son-in-law is arrested."

"Will Monsieur de Maugars remain in Paris?"

"No, he has gone into the country to Vésinet."

"With Mademoiselle de Maugars, of course. What a horrible situation for that young lady!"

"Horrible is the word. The poor girl is in despair, but she does not know the truth, for her father told her that Estelan was accidentally killed by falling from the window."

"What! Does she believe herself to be a widow?"

"Yes, Monsieur de Maugars did right in concealing from her the fact that the wretch whose name she bears is likely to end at the galleyes."

"She will know it soon enough. However, it seems to me, that Monsieur de Maugars has been imprudent, for his daughter might think of marrying again—not now, I don't mean that, but later on. And her lot would be still more frightful than it now is, if, thinking herself free to dispose of her affections, she should bestow them—upon you, for instance, my dear Guy. Excuse my frankness in speaking out, but I have such a liking for you that it gives me a right, perhaps, to do so. However, if you think that amiss——"

"I? not at all! I am greatly obliged so you for pointing out this danger, and to prove to you that I do not take it amiss, I will tell you, in my turn, all that I think, and all that I intend to do. You must give me your advice, my dear friend."

"I am quite at your disposal, my dear Guy, not only as to advice but help at any time."

"Thanks, Frédéric. I accept. You have more experience than I, and I possess blind confidence in you. Let me confess, then, that before this fatal marriage took place I was really in love with Mademoiselle de Maugars. I ceased to see her, but I am not sure that I do not love her still. I know that she was not indifferent to me, and, it may be, she still remembers me. So I would rather not expose myself to the danger of renewing an intimacy which would only reduce us both to despair, as her rascally husband is still alive."

"But if he were dead——"

"If he were dead I should be only too happy to marry Mademoiselle de Maugars. A week ago I told you the reverse of this, but I was not sincere. I was deceived as to my own feelings. But I am so no longer, and I will tell you all."

"My dear Bautin, I am deeply sensible to this frankness on your part, and I can understand how it is that you brave prejudice in saying that you would be willing to become Monsieur d'Estelan's successor."

"If he still lives, as I fear he does, the only remaining hope is that he may disappear for ever, and he must be given the means of doing so, in

order to spare Monsieur de Maugars the pain of hearing his daughter's name in an assize court."

"That would be very generous on your part, my dear Bautru, and I confess, that if I were in your place, I should not have the courage to leave the man who had stolen my happiness unpunished."

"I do not think that I have such courage. It is my uncle who has undertaken this disagreeable task."

"Your uncle! he is not in Paris, is he?"

"Not only in Paris, but here at this ball. I brought him here with an object which you will presently understand. He and I are agreed on a plan, and we shall divide operations. He will try to find Estelan, and I shall try to find another scoundrel, still viler and more cowardly—the man who, by his anonymous denunciations, caused the disaster which has fallen upon Monsieur de Maugars and his daughter. I rely upon you, my friend, to help me in finding that man. I appeal to your wisdom and rely on your devotion. And, in the first place, I ask you, who can have committed this infamous act?"

The conversation between Frédoc and Bautru was carried on in a solitary avenue shaded by tall acacias and bordered by thick hedges.

The ball had only commenced, and guests had not yet begun to stream out into the park. Still, some lords and ladies in court-dress were to be seen passing at the end of the avenue, trying to imagine that they were all following the "Great Monarch" through the groves of Versailles. Here and there, a goddess escorted by a mere mortal dressed as a marquis or a Tsigane, could be espied, or a Trianon shepherdess, with a troop of admirers of every period. But these groups disappeared as soon as perceived, and the hum of their distant voices did not disturb the two friends. Guy was somewhat surprised at seeing no more of his uncle and Rangouze, who had gone off after M. Aubijoux.

"Yes," he resumed, "I beg you to tell me what you think of these letters, sent one after another to the police and the newspapers, to denounce Estelan and disgrace Monsieur de Maugars."

"I think that they were sent by some enemy of that fellow Estelan," replied Frédoc, at once.

"My uncle does not agree with you. He thinks that they were written by an enemy of the count."

"That is unlikely, but not impossible. Have you kept the one which Métel gave you?"

"Yes, indeed! I put it carefully away in my desk. It may serve us later on. But I ask you, who are an old Parisian, and who know almost everybody, are you acquainted with any one who has any reason to wish to be avenged on Monsieur de Maugars?"

"My dear Guy, I don't know so many people as you imagine, and you have much too high an opinion of my wisdom. I know a good many persons, it is true, but I have never had anything to do with the Count de Maugars, and I am not able to say whom he may have offended, if, indeed, he has given offence to anybody."

"Some husband, for instance? The count used to be rather a rake."

"Formerly, long ago, for he must be sixty now. These much-deceived men must be dead."

"That is what I said to my uncle."

"Besides, I don't see what interest you can have in solving the question. The harm is done; what matters who did it?"

"Excuse me, my dear friend! If the blow was directed at Maugars, he must be open to other attacks, and it is important to preserve him from them by unmasking the hidden persecutor who is trying to ruin him."

"No doubt; but what can Monsieur de Maugars fear now? He has been wounded in all that he held dear on earth, his daughter, the honour of his name—"

"There is his fortune left."

"It is safe in his notary's hands. Monsieur Prunevaux is a most reliable man. His honesty is above suspicion, he has almost the largest practice in Paris, and, besides, he has other resources."

"I know that, and I don't believe that he would embezzle Monsieur de Maugars' money. What I ask you, my dear Frédoc, is to let me know in case you should come upon the track of the accuser."

"Rely upon me; but I doubt whether that will ever happen."

"You would be more likely to find him than I. You told me just now that you knew Monsieur Aubijoux. Well, Aubijoux knows this fellow Estelan."

"Aubijoux met him in Mexico, where his business has often taken him, but he has never been intimate with him, to my knowledge."

"But still, he endorsed him. It was of Monsieur Aubijoux that Prunevaux obtained the information which Monsieur de Maugars required about his future son-in-law."

"I was not aware of that," said Frédoc, thoughtfully.

"I was ignorant of it also. But my uncle told me so this evening. He was told of it by Prunevaux himself, and he came to this ball to find out something more about it."

"How?"

"It is easy to understand. I thought that I should meet you here, and that you would introduce him to Monsieur Aubijoux, at my request."

"Nothing easier; but I don't see—"

"He thought that Monsieur Aubijoux would perhaps know what has become of Estelan."

"I doubt that; and if he knows, I don't think he will tell us."

"Why not? Estelau isn't his friend. He may have been so; but an honourable merchant does not take the part of a thief. My uncle will appeal to his conscience. He will tell him the situation of Maugars and his daughter. He will tell him that the question is not to give the guilty man up to the law, but to help him to fly. Monsieur Aubijoux won't refuse to second him, even though he may be interested in Estelan."

"That may be," muttered Frédoc, who listened with kind attention to his young friend's reasoning."

"What kind of man is Aubijoux?" asked Bautru.

"Aubijoux? He is like an iron bar, stiff and rigid. He can't be made to change. He is kind and obliging, but wonderfully firm in business matters. I should like him as a friend, but I should dread him as an enemy."

"I hope, then, that he will be on our side. What do you think of his wife?"

"She seems to have been true to him. But let us return to Monsieur Souscarrière, your uncle. I should like to see him, as he thinks of applying to me."

"Oh! he found some one who undertook to introduce him to Monsieur Aubijoux."

"Who is that?"

"Rangouze."

"I didn't know that Rangouze was on such good terms with our host as to venture to do that. He has done some little business with Aubijoux, but not enough to have any importance in his eyes. Your uncle might have chosen better."

"He did not choose at all. Rangouze flung himself at his head, so to say. He told him that Monsieur Aubijoux was walking about the park with Monsieur Pruneaux, and offered to take him where he thought they might be found."

"Ah! Pruneaux is here, then?"

"Yes; and dressed, it appears, as a Turk. I am greatly surprised by this notary's style of living. He goes to Mabille, and does not hesitate to appear at fancy balls."

"He is fond of pleasure, like all who have long been deprived of it. Pruneaux was very much under restraint in his youth. But he is an honest man."

"I don't doubt that, and I hope that we shall find him in the grove. I remember, now, that it was he, and not Rangouze, who was to do the introducing. Rangouze merely offered to serve as a guide, and he took my uncle away with him, for he did not care to be seen by the ladies. They must be somewhere about here."

"Oh, the park is large, and we might wander about for a long time without coming across them. Besides, Aubijoux has his duties as a host to attend to; and, although he would, I admit, willingly dispense with them, I presume that he must have gone back to join his wife for fear of being found fault with. We had better—"

"Hush!" said Bautru, in a whisper; "I hear some one talking behind this hedge, and I think that I recognise Pruneaux's voice."

"No, I'm certain that it is Aubijoux who is talking."

The two persons hidden behind the trees came nearer, and a voice was heard exclaiming: "No, sir; it's impossible. I do business, but not this kind of business. I am a merchant—not a money-lender."

"Is that you, my dear Aubijoux?" exclaimed Frédoc. "I was looking for you." And he went rapidly forward towards an opening in the hedge.

Almost immediately Bautru saw two men approach, one of whom was well known to him—Pruneaux, richly attired as a Turk, with flowers embroidered upon his dolman and an immense turban upon his head. The notary, thus dressed, was the oddest figure imaginable, but he did not seem nearly as merry as at Mabille.

His companion looked better in the curled wig of Monsieur Jourdain, the Bourgeois-Gentilhomme, and it was easy to guess why he had chosen this dress, for he wore the rhinegrave coat with its gold braid, the embroidered vest, and the lace ruffles, as though he had never worn anything different in his life. But his rugged features did not, in the least, recall the type of the Bourgeois-Gentilhomme, as created by Molière. They seemed to be hewn, not chiselled. His forehead was low and prominent, his nose salient, his lips compressed, his chin projecting, and his eyes shaded by thick eyebrows.

There was something sympathetic about his face, although not much, but it was by no means commonplace, and it was easy to see at a glance that M. Aubijoux had great strength of purpose and unusual energy. "Ah, it is you, Frédoc," he exclaimed, and his somewhat surly look

vanished, a pleasant smile appeared on his face, and he showed his white teeth. Bautru now began to think him less ugly than before. "You are like me, my dear friend," added Aubijoux, gaily, "you have run away from the ball-room. I could not endure it any longer, I was melting, and so I followed Monsieur Prunevaux who had the courage to talk to me about business under the trees. Lawyers are pitiless men."

"You must excuse me, sir," said Prunevaux, with a piteous look, "I chose my time very badly, I admit, but you are so beset at your office that I took time by the forelock."

"Oh, I forgive you, and I answered you frankly. That's my way. I don't like business men who do not settle matters at once. It is yes or no with me. Ask Frédoc if it isn't."

"My dear Aubijoux," said the amiable sexagenarian, whose testimony was called for, "allow me to introduce Monsieur Guy de Bautru to you."

"Very happy, sir, to make your acquaintance. How do you like my wife's ball? It is a superb affair, is it not? Léonie knows what she does. But she has invited too many guests, and they have too many diamonds. My eyes ache with them. Some of the costumes are certainly surprising. There's one man over there, in what I suppose is a costume, but he looks like a giant clad with steel. See, he has just entered the avenue. He might be a statue if he did not walk."

Guy turned hastily round, and by the light of the electric lamps he saw uncle Souscarrière, who was coming towards him as fast as was possible in the trappings he wore. Rangouze fluttered beside him in his "Incroyable" dress, and as soon as he espied M. Aubijoux and Prunevaux, he pointed them out to the knight he was guiding, and then beat a retreat.

"I am the giant's nephew," said Bautru, laughing.

"What!" exclaimed Frédoc, "is the walking armoury your—"

"My uncle, Monsieur Souscarrière, who wishes to pay his respects to Monsieur Aubijoux, and relies upon Monsieur Prunevaux to introduce him."

"I will save him some steps then," said M. Aubijoux, politely, "for it cannot be easy for him to walk about with all that weight upon him." And he advanced to meet the knight.

Introductions took place as usual. The sight was an odd one. Prunevaux was blushing, turbaned though he was, Frédoc was gazing at the uncle, the uncle at Aubijoux, and the latter was greatly amused with the astonishing warrior who was walking about in his park. Bautru, somewhat annoyed, was mentally asking himself what would be the result of this strange meeting.

However, M. Souscarrière came to the point without any preamble. "I thank you for your kind reception, sir," said he to the merchant, "and I should be greatly obliged to you if you would kindly grant me a few moments' private talk. I wish to ask you for some special information, and I—"

"Excuse me, uncle," said Bautru, "but it seems to me idle to ask for a private talk, as Monsieur Prunevaux knows all about the matter on hand, and I have just been speaking to Monsieur Frédoc concerning it."

"Ah, very well; then this is the gentleman whom you mentioned to me. I will speak out, then," and Souscarrière accordingly began :

"Monsieur Prunevaux, who is here present, assured me that you were very well acquainted, sir, with the Monsieur Estelan who married Mademoiselle de Maugars last week, and who—"

"I know what you are about to add," said M. Aubijoux, promptly, "and I simply wish to say at once that Estelan is quite innocent of the infamous act of which he is accused."

"Estelan innocent!" exclaimed Souscarrière. "But you can't mean it, sir. There is a warrant out against him. He was about to be arrested on his wedding-day, when he ran off."

"I know all that; I saw him immediately after what occurred. He came to me."

"To you? Here?"

"No; to my office on the Boulevard Poissonniere. I was there, and he told me everything."

"You said nothing of all this to me, my dear Aubijoux," remarked Frédoc.

"Why should I have done so? You do not know Estelan; but I do, and I would guarantee his honesty as I would my own. I knew him in Mexico under circumstances which show what a man is."

"He is accused of a theft committed ten years ago," said Bautru.

"He is accused wrongfully. Estelan, ten years ago, was the same kind of man that he is now."

"But the law—"

"The law has taken a serious view of a slander. It is, or rather was, wrong. Estelan will clear himself."

"Why did he not do so at once?"

"His father-in-law refused to hear a word, but gave him a pistol, requiring that he should blow out his brains; and the poor young fellow almost obeyed the madman's orders."

"I have the honour of being a friend of the Count de Maugars," said Souscarrièrc, hastily.

"Well, then, if you are, I beg you to tell him from me that he has himself to thank for what has happened."

"What would you have had him do?"

"Let his son-in-law speak before a sensible magistrate. A man who is accused is not condemned without proof, and I defy anybody to bring proof against Estelan. If your Monsieur de Maugars had had any self-possession everything could have been arranged. But he lost his head and thought himself dishonoured because his daughter's husband was about to be arrested. No one knew anything about it, and the law had no interest whatever in noising the matter about. A quiet inquiry would have been made, and it could only have resulted in establishing Estelan's innocence. He would have been set free at once. Monsieur de Maugars went too far. Estelan took the only chance that was offered, and escaped at the risk of his life. It is a miracle that he did not kill himself in leaping from the window. But the story was spread about all over Paris. The papers were full of it, and now the harm is irreparable. Estelan may show that there has been a judicial error, but the stupid public will not overlook the fact that he has been suspected of stealing."

This earnest assertion of facts made a great impression upon Aubijoux's listeners. Prundeaux, especially, seemed convinced. He was, in a manner, listening to his own justification, for he had greatly favoured the unfortunate match. Frédoc, on his side, seemed to be reflecting.

Bautru hung his head as he heard M. Aubijoux's eloquent words, and M. Souscarrière, who had a great deal of good sense, felt the justice of the arguments brought forward by this unexpected defender. He began

to think that Maugars had been in too much of a hurry, but he was not yet convinced that Estelan had nothing to reproach himself with, and he so declared.

"Well, it may be as you say," said he. "I admit that Maugars was wrong, but what will Estelan do? You say that he means to clear himself. If that is what he intends to do he sets about it strangely. It isn't by going abroad that he will accomplish it."

"Who says that he is abroad?" replied M. Aubijoux.

"Where is he, then?"

"You can't imagine that I am going to tell you that."

"Very well! Then he is hiding, and you are helping him to conceal himself. I don't say anything against it, but I will at least ask when and how there is to be an end to the present state of things?"

"I have no right to answer that question."

"You think, perhaps, that I am looking for Monsieur d'Estelan to hand him over to the police. You are altogether mistaken. If I found him I should simply ask him to put an end to the agonies of a justly irritated father and an unhappy wife. I should say to him: 'If you are guilty, disappear for ever. If you are innocent, make haste to prove it. There are many tears shed and much suffering in the house where grief has come on your account.'"

Souscarrière was right. M. Aubijoux looked up and started. Then in a voice which showed signs of emotion, he replied: "No one more deeply deplores than I do, sir, the sad misfortune which the young lady whom Estelan married has met with. I cannot take upon myself to tell you where he has gone, for the secret was confided to me by him, and I shall not betray it. But I can assure you that Estelan needs no one's help, that he will not be arrested, and that, on the contrary, he will soon re-appear, completely cleared. He is now collecting the proofs of his innocence. When he has done this he will voluntarily go before the investigating magistrate who has this sad affair in hand, and the prosecution will be declared null and void at once. Tell this to Monsieur de Maugars, sir. Tell him, also, that Estelan has forgiven him for the harm which he has done to him."

"That is all very well," grumbled Souscarrière; "but a theft has been committed, and as long as the culprit is not found no one will believe that your friend is innocent."

"Estelan is looking for the real offender, and I need not hide from you that he is upon his track."

"Oh, if the true criminal were found," said Frédoc, "things would take another turn. But, after ten years—"

"It is difficult, no doubt. But it is not impossible. The robbery was committed by another clerk who was in the merchant's employ at the same time as Estelan. Estelan was accused because he went away on the day after the robbery. The other clerk remained. He was aware that Estelan intended to leave, and he chose the night of his departure to break the safe open, hoping that he himself would not be suspected, and that the absent clerk would be accused."

"And you know where this wretch now is?"

"Not yet, but we shall know very soon. My correspondent at Marseilles has sent me word that he left the country after the war, to set up in business at Algiers. He did, indeed, go there, but he did not remain for long, and it is probable that he is now living in Paris under a false name."

"But he must have made off now that the affair has been reported in the papers, for he must know that if Estelan is arrested, his name will be given."

"No, for the public are ignorant that Estelan is accused of a crime committed at Marseilles in 1870, and, besides, when he was the real criminal's fellow clerk, he simply called himself Vallouris. The culprit can't guess that Vallouris is Estelan."

"True," muttered Frédoc.

"Well, sir," said Souscarrière, "I think a great deal of your views as regards the son-in-law of my friend Maugars, but it isn't proved that they will be shared by the magistrates who will try him; and it would, I think, be better that he should cross the frontier for the time being, for he might be arrested at any moment."

"Don't be afraid of that, sir; I will answer for it that the police won't find him. He is not within their reach."

"I hope not. But I advise you not to speak in that way before other persons, as, for instance, a detective, for he would certainly imagine you were harbouring the fugitive."

"He would be mistaken; Estelan had no need of me to conceal himself. He had the presence of mind to go home and take all the money that belonged to him. With money, people do whatever they wish. I only helped him with my advice, and I repeat that he is quite safe."

"If that is the case," said Souscarrière, after a short pause, "I have only to ask you in the name of those who have been reduced to despair by this sad affair, to do all you can to bring it to a speedy conclusion."

"Rely upon me as to that," replied Aubijoux. "And on my side I hope I can rely upon you, gentlemen, not to allude to what has been said here. I am sure of my friend Frédoc's discretion."

"Be sure of mine," exclaimed Prunevaux. "Mademoiselle de Maugars' wedding has given me trouble enough as it is, for I drew up the contract, and I may venture to say that I am reproached with not having known more about the future husband, as though I could possibly have been aware that he was being looked for by the police, and had anything in his past life against him!"

"My nephew and I will be silent, sir," said Souscarrière. "I shall not even tell my friend Maugars that I have said anything to you."

"You are right in that. When Estelan reappears Monsieur de Maugars will have the pleasure of the surprise. And now, gentlemen, allow me to rejoin Madame Aubijoux. She will not forgive me if I neglect my duties as host any longer. I am obliged to be on hand at supper, and it will be early. The sun rises early now, and Léonie says nothing annoys women more than being seen at dawn in full dress."

"I will go back with you," said Prunevaux, hastily, wishing to avoid certain questions from Frédoc.

Aubijoux thereupon took leave of his guests and went away with the notary.

"Well!" exclaimed Souscarrière, "I never expected to hear from this worthy man's lips that Estelan is as white as snow."

"Do you believe that he is?" said Frédoc, somewhat sneeringly.

"Not exactly, but I admit that what Monsieur Aubijoux says has made me reflect."

"Aubijoux cannot be shaken in his friendship, and will never admit that he has been mistaken. Monsieur d'Estelan might be sent to the galleys, but he would still assert his innocence."

"Then you think, sir, that he is guilty?"

"I know nothing about it. What I see in all this, and very clearly too, is that Aubijoux knows where he, is and that the pair are playing a very dangerous game. The police are much sharper than they think, and if they catch Estelan there will be a frightful scandal."

"And he would protest and call upon Monsieur Aubijoux's testimony in vain, you see. The affair would follow its regular course. The innocence of a man is not demonstrated like a mathematical problem, on the spot. I return to my first idea. I shall try to find Estelan, and when I do so I shall give him his choice between expatriation and a sword-thrust. What do you think of that, sir?"

"I like the plan."

"I am delighted! My nephew has entire confidence in you; so have I, and I hope to see more of you."

"I beg you to believe, sir, that I am quite at your service. If I learn anything that can be of any use to you I will let you know at once."

"Thanks," said Souscarrière, placing his gauntleted hand in that of his obliging acquaintance. "Allow me to call upon you."

"Whenever you please, sir; your nephew knows my address. I leave you with him. You must have a great deal to say to one another, and I wish to rejoin Aubijoux. When I have him alone he will be confidential, perhaps, and if I learn anything of interest I will tell it to you."

"Your friend is a fine man," said Souscarrière to Guy, when Frédoc had left them. "I like frank, open dispositions. You must take me to call on him some day."

"With pleasure; but now that we are alone, I must tell you that I do not in the least wish to go to Vésinet. Estelan is as alive as any man can be, it appears, and in Paris, besides. If he is arrested and convicted he will be Mademoiselle de Maugars' husband none the less; and if the accusation proves false, he will triumphantly resume his rights as her husband. It would be madness for me to return to a house which I could not visit if he returned there himself."

"You are right, perhaps. I will see Maugars and excuse you to him. But if you renounce Madeleine, what will you do?"

"Follow your advice; finish ruining myself and then enlist. I shan't require more than six months to wind up."

"Why not ruin yourself only two-thirds and enlist now?"

"No; I want to go the length of my tether; and to begin, I am going back to the ball-room. Don't you wish to see the sight?"

"No, I am going home to lay aside my warlike garb. I have had enough of the ball, although I don't regret having come here. I presume that your man-servant will be up."

"He is waiting for you, uncle, and I must beg you to take the carriage that brought us here. I will obtain a cab."

"Very good. You will sleep until noon, I suppose. Before you go to bed be kind enough to tell your groom to be at the stables at nine. I should like to try one of your horses to-morrow."

VI.

UNCLE SOUSCARRIÈRE always went to work in a military manner. When he made up his mind to do a thing he did it, and when he once formed a plan he executed it as determined upon.

At a quarter to nine he was on his way to the Rue Auber. The knight of the Renaissance had become a country gentleman again. He had scarcely taken time to sleep, but he did not think of that, for he proposed to ride three miles before Guy was out of bed. So he was not a little surprised to find his nephew at the stables watching his groom, who was saddling a bay horse which was not very well up to the ex-colonel's weight.

"Bravo!" shouted Souscarrière. "I begin to think that you will do well in the regiment. How in the world did you manage to be up so early?"

"Very easily," replied Bautru. "I did not go to bed."

"Indeed! When did you leave the ball, then? Is it over?"

"I don't think that it is. At five they were all at supper, and after that there was a cotillion that seemed endless. I am sorry that you did not stay. The sight was beautiful on entering the supper-room. There was plate such as is seldom seen, and the most delicate Sèvres porcelain. And there were flowers everywhere, even around the dishes. We ate amidst roses. I say nothing of the women, for they all were charming."

"Oho! then, you had a very fine time of it! It must be much duller than that at Vésinet."

"I fear so, but I assure you that I did all I could to forget that. If you blame me I can only repeat what I said when we parted last night. Madeleine de Maugars is not a widow. I had better forget her."

"You made love to your neighbour at supper, I suppose, in order to forget her the sooner?"

"No, I didn't, and I am the more deserving of praise as the lady seemed pleased with my society."

"Then, out of contradiction, she will like you all the better as you did not court her. That is the way with women. Did you see Monsieur Aubijoux again?"

"Yes, in the distance. He was walking about among the tables with his curled wig in full feather, and playing his part of Bourgeois Gentilhomme as naturally as can be imagined. But Madame Aubijoux is not in the least like Madame Jourdain. Frédoc says that her husband idolises her. Do you know, I think, that he merely takes Estelan's part because he has had some pleasant business transactions with him, and thinks him faultless for that reason? Business men imagine that because a chap meets his notes when due he is an honest man."

"Yes, I think with you that he has been deceived just like Maugars, and I fancy Estelan won't reappear. My first plan was the best, but it now appears impracticable; this scoundrel is so hidden away that he will not be found. Maugars will do as well to remain in retirement as I advised, and I see nothing better for you than the Chasseurs d'Afrique. That is no reason why I shouldn't go to thank Monsieur Frédoc for his kindness. If you like, we will go to call upon him after breakfast, and you must breakfast with me, my lad! I shall be back between ten and eleven."

"I will wait for you, uncle."

"I shall have a good appetite, I promise you. How much did you pay

for this horse?" added Souscarrière, examining the animal which the groom was now leading forward.

"Three thousand three hundred francs."

"You were swindled! I would not give more than a hundred napoleons for him, nor even that."

"He wouldn't suit you; you would kill him in six weeks," exclaimed Bautru, with a laugh.

"Don't be afraid, I'll take good care of the beast. I don't want you to be the loser when you have to sell him. That will soon happen, I imagine, for I have had a letter from my agent, who tells me that the Bois-Guillaume farm is for sale."

"True. I have a back debt to pay, and I don't wish to leave any of the kind behind me when I enlist. You ought to buy the farm yourself."

"And pay you for it, cash down, I suppose? No, my fine nephew, I shan't commit such an act of folly. You wouldn't pay your debts, and you would squander the money. Let down these stirrups, lad," added Souscarrière, to the groom. "Don't you see that they are much too short for me? They would do at the most for a whipper-snapper like you. There! that's right now," and he vaulted into the saddle as lightly as though he had been only twenty.

"Come back soon!" called out Guy as Souscarrière left the courtyard.

The horse had some mettle and was not used to being ridden by a colossus. Besides, the old officer pulled hard on the rein. The bay attempted to rebel, and in crossing the Place de l'Opéra afforded a fine sight to the waiters who were setting out the tables before the Café de la Paix, for they saw an Anglo-Norman brought to terms and made to go the proper pace by a native of Anjou, and this in spite of all his starts and other capers. When they reached the church of the Madeleine the animal was as quiet as a lamb; and at the entrance of the Champs Elysées, Souscarrière urged it into a brisk canter, which soon brought steed and rider to the gate of the Bois de Boulogne.

The morning was foggy, and there were few riders about; merely some grooms on their masters' horses, and here and there a young lady taking her lesson with a riding-master, or a beginner busily trying a new horse from Tattersalls'. Souscarrière, who rode for the pleasure of riding, did not care if there were few or many persons about; he might have been in utter solitude for all that it mattered to him. He glanced at the fortifications which recalled his youth, and remembered that it was along the avenue near by that the gay men of his day used to parade, and that he had himself been admired there. But he did not care to look at the scene of bygone pleasure, and so shunning the Allée des Poteaux—now the fashionable ride—he went toward the wide Allée de Longchamps. The place seemed to him well suited to show his skill as a bold rider, and he decided to have a gallop, to the great displeasure of Guy's bay, who did not like a constant change of pace, being used to simple riders.

"Everything is wretched now-a-days," muttered Souscarrière. "This horse is not up to the mark by any means, and I see by the bit and the saddle that my nephew likes English novelties. I must take him back to first principles." And, tired of jockeying for the pleasure of two or three persons who were looking on while giving an airing to their dogs, the ex-colonel slackened the rein and started off at an easy trot which reconciled him with his steed.

He intended to go round the Bois at this pace and return slowly to

Paris, but as he drew near the Route des Bouleaux he saw a rider whom he at once recognised, although he had seen him but once before, and then attired as a peasant of Brittany. It was Frédoc, mounted on an indifferent horse which could not have cost him much. He was approaching at a walk, with the reins on his horse's neck, and he appeared to be lost in thought.

Souscarrière's voice made him raise his head. "Upon my word, my dear sir, I am glad to meet you," exclaimed Bautru's uncle. "You had the same idea as myself, and I am not surprised at that, for when we were young, morning exercise was customary. Nowadays, young men usually sleep till noon."

"I will admit," said Frédoc, modestly, "that I don't often ride, but as chance has brought us together, I am glad that I came for a turn before breakfast to-day. I didn't close my eyes last night. Our conversation in the park disturbed me, and I needed a ride to clear away the cobwebs."

"So did I. We will ride along side by side, if you like, but I won't consent to drop the subject of Monsieur d'Estelan's antecedents, for I cannot dismiss it from my mind."

"I find it the same with myself," said Frédoc, taking up a position on Souscarrière's left side. "I even thought of going back to Paris by the Porte d'Auteuil and the Boulevard de Montmorency, so as to stop and have another talk with Aubijoux."

"That is an excellent idea of yours. If the worthy man consents to tell us where his favourite is, I will undertake to have a decisive interview with Estelan. The worst of every ill is suspense, and I want my friend Maugars to know what future really awaits his unfortunate daughter."

"I understand that all the better from the fact that your nephew told me how he stands as regards Mademoiselle de Maugars."

"Ah ! he told you—"

"That he had formerly loved her, and still thought of her, so that he would be willing to marry her if she were a widow."

"I did not know that he had gone so far in his confidential communications, but I don't disapprove of it, for—why shouldn't I say it?—I have taken a very great liking to you."

"The same is the case with me, sir, as regards yourself," answered Frédoc, smilingly, at once.

"I dare say ; and it is quite natural that we should understand one another, for it seems to me that we agree on many points. We are about the same age, too, I believe ?"

"Oh no ! I am certainly the elder."

"That may be, but not much. I suppose that, like myself, you have never married ?"

Frédoc shook his head, as if to say that he had not.

"And you were once a soldier ?" resumed Souscarrière.

"No, I never had that honour. I even admit that I have not done much else than live upon my income."

"Nor have I, for twenty years past. You see that we can understand one another. Did you see Monsieur Aubijoux again last night ? You did not, I believe."

"No, I went away a little while after you had left, and long before the ball was over. There was no use in remaining. I should not have been able to get a word from Aubijoux as long as his wife was by, for he only has eyes and ears for her."

"Do you think that if she knew where Estelan is we could make her tell us?"

"I don't think that her husband has told her, but if I see him this morning I will find out if I can. Still, it would not surprise me to hear that he had left for Hâvre or Marseilles. He is constantly rushing off in one direction or another."

"Let us hope that he is still in bed, and so that you may not miss him if he is to be found at home, let us make for the Porte d'Auteuil by the shortest road."

"If that suits you, we will."

They had now come to the Rue de Madrid, which branches off into the Allée de Longchamps.

"Let us take this path which leads to the great lake," said Souscarrière. "It will take us direct to Auteuil, and I will leave you at the fortifications."

This somewhat narrow route was edged on one side by a strip of lawn and on the other by a somewhat thickish hedge. The two horses had just turned down it when a loud report was heard near them. The bay started, as if inclined to bolt, and as Souscarrière checked it, he said to Frédoc: "What the deuce is that? Some one fired in the cover. I thought there was no shooting until September."

"Shooting has not been allowed in the Bois de Boulogne for many years past. That was a pistol shot."

"From a horse-pistol, then," said Souscarrière. "A revolver would have made much less noise. But what was the shot directed at? Not at us, for I didn't hear any bullet whistle by, and I know that kind of music very well."

"Some unfortunate person has probably blown out his brains."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes; the Bois is one of the favourite places for committing suicide."

"If I ever thought of doing that I shouldn't do so in the open air."

"Those who kill themselves sometimes wish to do so at a distance from their homes."

"We ought to speak to the first keeper we see," said Souscarrière, quietly.

"It seems to me that we should do better if we went to see if the man who fired doesn't need any help. It may have been an accident."

"But how can we cross the thicket on horseback. It is very dense—"

"One of us can dismount—"

"I should prefer that you should do so, then, for the bay I am riding is very skittish; the flies are worrying it. You wouldn't be able to hold it easily."

"My horse is extremely quiet, and if you will take charge of it while I go to see what has occurred—"

"Willingly. Get off, and give me the reins."

Frédoc did as Guy's uncle suggested, and went into the cover.

"He is a good fellow," thought Souscarrière, as he led the horses under shade. "I should have gone on. He doesn't and he can scarcely like going where he has gone, for he looked greatly disturbed; it was at the thought of seeing a corpse. That is quite natural, as he has never been in action—I ought to have spared him this disagreeable task."

Frédoc had disappeared behind the bushes, and no one was in sight. At this early hour and in foggy weather the paths of the Bois de Boulogne are but little frequented.

The owner of La Bretêche felt a certain satisfaction in remarking that the most fashionable park in Paris was not so well kept as his own woods in Anjou.

"At home," muttered he, "if a shot were fired like that my old game keeper, La Ramée, would go to see whether any one was meddling with my deer; and yet if we had not happened to be here no one would have taken the least notice. Frédoc doesn't make his appearance—there must be a dead or a wounded man in there—wounded, most likely, or else he would have returned before now. The man can have only harmed himself, and Frédoc is trying to help him. That is very kind, but if he stays much longer he will miss Aubijoux. Why doesn't he call me? I might tie up the horses and go to help him myself—Ah, here he is at last!"

Frédoc now emerged from the thicket. He was very pale, and his eyes glittered.

"Well?" called Souscarrière.

"I was right. A man has just killed himself fifty paces from here."

"Is he quite dead?"

"The shot has carried away half of his skull; he used a very large pistol."

"I told you that when I heard the sound. We can't revive the poor devil. Let us go on, if you wish to reach the Boulevard Montmorency in good time. But what is the matter?—you seem very much disturbed. Ah! I see! you are not used to such sights. If you had seen the streets of Zaatcha after the assault, you——"

"It isn't that—I did not tell you all—I saw a letter beside the body, and I read on the address a name——"

"What name?" asked Souscarrière, in surprise.

"Look!" said Frédoc, handing him a letter spotted with blood.

Souscarrière took hold of it, and scarcely had he cast his eyes upon the address when he exclaimed: "Estelan! The letter is addressed to Estelan! —and you say that you found it beside the dead man?"

"Under his hand. He was evidently holding it when he fired."

"Then it is he, the unfortunate man, who has dealt justice upon himself!"

"I know nothing about that."

"Didn't you look at him?"

"Yes——"

"How is it that you did not recognise him? You saw him when he was alive. My nephew told me that you were at the wedding mass."

"The effect of the shot was horrible; the fellow's forehead is completely shattered."

"But the face is not entirely destroyed, I presume, and what remains——"

"Is like Estelan. There is his black moustache, his dark complexion, and the man is of the same age, too."

"What are his clothes like?"

"They are those of a man of fashion."

"There can be no doubt, then. It is Estelan! Besides, how could this letter have been there unless it were he?"

"I have not had the courage to open it," muttered Frédoc.

"I will open it, then. This is no time for squeamishness. My nephew and my friends have too great an interest in knowing the truth. The letter isn't sealed, in fact it has already been opened, and the persons who report the suicide will not scruple to look at it. I shall, therefore, take the liberty of reading it before they do."

Souscarrière thereupon read aloud : "Sir, I think it my duty to warn you that if you remain in the house where you now are, you will be arrested to-night. You have been denounced by an enemy who has again found you out. Go away without losing a moment, and try to leave France by the Prussian frontier. This is the advice of one to whom you formerly rendered a service, and who knows what is now awaiting you. Don't hesitate to follow this advice. To-morrow it will be too late."

"Well!" exclaimed Souscarrière, "are you still in doubt?"

"I don't know," stammered Frédoc. "This letter does not enlighten me."

"It enlightens me, and I am going to tell you what has happened. Estelan received it. He saw that he was lost. The Prussian frontier is no easier to cross than any other. The place where he was in hiding was no longer safe. He accordingly resolved to die, and as he did not wish to compromise the friend with whom he had found an asylum, he left his house, walked all night in despair about the Bois de Boulogne, and finally resolved to put an end to his sufferings."

"Yes, all that is quite possible—"

"It is true. The daughter of my friend Maugars is a widow," exclaimed Souscarrière, triumphantly.

"I hope that this is so, but so that she may be free in the eyes of the law the death of her husband must be proved in a certain manner, and I wonder whether this document will be looked upon as sufficient proof. A certificate of death is never given lightly."

"How do you know that some other papers may not be found in the dead man's pocket? At all events our duty is to let some of the authorities know what has happened."

"Of course, but what shall we do with the letter?"

"We might deposit it in the place where you found it."

"It would be better, I think, to give it to the officer who will be charged with the inquiry. If the wind blew it away, or some one passing by took it, there—"

"You are right, and, besides, it is important to establish the authenticity of what we have found. Go and look about everywhere. I will remain here and wait until you find one of the keepers. They can report the case. Here are two coming up now."

"Good! they are less negligent than I thought them."

Two men in green uniforms were coming forward from a turn in the avenue. They had evidently heard the report of the pistol and were hastening towards the riders to question them.

Souscarrière urged on his horse and called out to them : "Come along, gentlemen! A man has just killed himself here in the wood."

"Another! that makes the seventh since the beginning of the year!" grumbled the older of the two keepers. "And only one out of the first six was ever recognised."

"This will help you to recognise this one," said Souscarrière, holding out the letter which he had put back into its envelope. "We were riding along the avenue when the pistol-shot was fired near us. My friend dis-

mounted ; he went to see what had happened, and he found this paper beside a body which does not look human any longer."

"Why, there's no address on the envelope. However, there's the man's name, and that will suffice to establish his identity. Where is the body?"

"Fifty paces from here, near a little glade and at the foot of a tall birch tree," said Frédoc. "I will take you there, if you like."

"There's no need of that. I can see the place from here."

"You don't need us, then ?" asked Souscarrière, who was desirous of returning to the Rue Auber.

"No, if you will tell us who you are."

"Here is my card, and this gentleman will give you his. We shall be at the disposal of the authorities if it is necessary to speak any further."

The name on Souscarrière's card produced a great effect, for, seeing that he was talking to an ex-colonel, the keeper, who was an old soldier, no longer opposed the departure of the witnesses. He knew very well that they could be relied upon to appear if needed.

"Ride on, gentlemen ; I must tell you, however, that you will undoubtedly be called upon to-day."

"Be easy in your mind ; we shall be ready. But by your manner, my friend, I'll wager you have been a sergeant."

"Sergeant-major, colonel."

"Good ! I know now that you won't lose our cards or the letter. We shall be at your disposal, my brave fellow, if you need us. And now let us trot off, both of us, single file."

Frédoc was in the saddle again, and he had to spur his horse on and force it to gallop to keep up with the trotting bay. Three minutes later both riders came to the road winding around the lake. Souscarrière began to walk his horse, and exclaimed : "There is, indeed, justice in heaven ! Estelan has made away with himself, and Madeleine will be happy."

"I hope that you may not be mistaken in your belief," said Frédoc, "but it is not yet proved that this body is Estelan's."

"That will soon be proved, and, by-the-by, I have a service to ask of you."

"Speak, my dear sir."

"Will you undertake to inform the police at once, the prefect, the commissary, the public prosecutor, or the investigating magistrate ; in fact, any one who is connected with this matter."

"I ! I rather think that it ought to be you."

"No, for it is known that I am intimately acquainted with Maugars, and my testimony might be open to suspicion. It had better come in merely to corroborate yours, and, besides, Guy is waiting for me, and I am very anxious to see him."

"I can understand that, but in what way can I come forward ?"

"As a friend. You are already my nephew's friend, and from to-day you become mine."

"With all my heart !"

"To-morrow I will introduce you to the count and his daughter."

"I should be greatly honoured, but really I—"

"No objections, now ! you will, of course, go on with us in the matter. Let us arrange our plan. Will you inform Monsieur Aubijoux of his favourite's suicide ?"

"Why should I? If it is really Estelan who has killed himself, he must have written a farewell letter to Aubijoux."

"True; and, besides, we are all interested in keeping this matter quiet. The magistrates who will have it in hand will understand the situation, and I hope that the newspapers won't get hold of it. As soon as we have the certificate of death I shall take Maugars, his daughter, and my nephew to Anjou. You must visit us there. We will pass the winter at my manor of La Bretêche. And in less than a year, when all these catastrophes have become an old story, we will celebrate a marriage at our village church which will turn out better than the wedding at La Trinité."

"In that case," said Frédoc, smiling, "you can have no doubt about Monsieur de Bautru proposing——"

"To marry Madeleine? He is head over heels in love with her. Didn't he tell you so? If not, he concealed it because he had no hope. I even think that he flirted with some other woman at the ball last night. But it was only to banish his gloomy thoughts, and when he hears that Madeleine is a widow, I'll answer for it that he won't think of any one else for a moment. I wish to take this great news to him myself, and I will ask your leave to ride off at full speed."

"Do so. My horse cannot keep up with yours. I will leave you now, and I promise you to do my best to carry out your intentions. I will call in the course of the day to communicate the result of the inquiry to Bautru."

"To Bautru and myself. I shan't leave him till I have seen you. Till we meet again, then, and soon, and thanks once more."

Souscarrière shook hands with Frédoc and spurred up his horse. Seeing this gigantic rider pass by at full gallop, the peaceful promenaders in the Avenue of the Bois de Boulogne paused in their stroll to look at him in amazement. He slackened his speed when he had passed the Arc de Triomphe, and, taking the shortest way, he went down the Avenue de Fricidland at a trot. He had soon reached the Rue Auber by the Boulevard Haussmann.

At the moment when he stopped his horse in front of the house where Bautru lived, the groom hurried forward, and the ex-colonel could not restrain some remarks as to the behaviour of the boy.

"Is my nephew here?" he asked, striding up the stairs, and ringing the bell as though the whole establishment belonged to him.

"Monsieur de Bautru is in the drawing-room."

Souscarrière was well acquainted with the distribution of the flat, and went straight towards the apartment in which the table was laid. The sight of the "appetisers" set upon it made him feel hungry, and he began to walk up and down so as to wait more patiently.

The dining-room was panelled like the hall of a château, and hung with such hunting trophies as stags' and boars' heads, with horns, knives, guns, and other sporting paraphernalia.

"What the deuce does he want with all these things?" muttered Souscarrière. "They are all for show and nothing else. It is three years since he hunted a roe at La Bretêche, and if he hunts in this part of the world it must be when there is a battue, a massacre of pheasants killed like chickens in a poultry-yard."

Suddenly the old sportsman, tired of waiting for his nephew to appear, and not finding him in the drawing-room, seized one of the trophies, a

hunting horn, and going to the door began to sound a "full cry" with all his lungs.

Guy rushed in; so did the valet, and they both found the old soldier firmly planted on his solid legs in the centre of the room, and blowing away like a madman.

"Good!" said he at last, quietly hanging up the hunting horn; "I am very well satisfied with myself. I find that I have plenty of lungs left, and your hunting-horn has some superb notes I must say. Where did you buy it, if I may ask?"

Bautru did all he could to restrain his exasperation. "Uncle," he exclaimed, "will you tell me why—?"

"Why I sounded the horn? Because I don't want to get out of practice."

"You made a frightful noise. They must have heard you on the boulevard."

"Well, if it's forbidden they will fine you, and I'll pay the piper. Call François and tell him to bring up breakfast. Riding has made me hungry, and blowing has made me thirsty."

"Your performance on the horn has taken away all the appetite I had," said Guy.

"So much the worse for you. You can look at me while I eat, for I hope that you don't propose to make me breakfast alone, and I beg you to send off the servant as soon as he has set the breakfast upon the table. I have something serious to communicate."

François came in at this moment, bringing the usual boiled eggs and steak with fried potatoes, which usually constitute the solid part of a bachelor breakfast in Paris. Strawberries and cheese also appeared, with some Chablis and Bordeaux, and as a reserve a bottle of fine old Pontet-Canet specially placed near Souscarrière.

"My lad," said he to the servant, "we will take our coffee in the picture-gallery. We don't want you any more, and Monsieur de Bautru is not at home to any one but Monsieur Frédoc. You understand, eh? Well then, be off."

The servant vanished at once. Souscarrière had already got him into military training.

"Are you expecting Frédoc?" asked Guy, sulkily, while his uncle knocked off the top of an egg.

"I am not expecting him just yet, but I am sure that we shall see him this afternoon. I met him riding in the Bois de Boulogne; we talked together for a long time, and he promised to come here in the course of the day."

"Have you heard anything new?"

"I shall tell you presently," replied the uncle, who had a way of preparing effects. "Well," he added, after a pause, "now let me tell you about Madeleine."

"Madeleine is married," replied Bautru, impatiently. "You don't intend, I presume, to advise me to turn her mind from her duty."

"She was married, but now she isn't."

"How long has this been the case?"

"Since this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"Estelan blew out his brains at ten o'clock to-day."

"How do you know that?"

"I was riding along a retired avenue in the Bois de Boulogne at the very moment when he killed himself in a thicket."

"Did you see him?" asked Guy, whose face had changed.

"No; besides, even if I had I shouldn't have recognised him, for I don't know him. But Monsieur Frédoc saw him."

"Did he? Then, no doubt, it was he."

"Frédoc found a letter beside the body addressed to Estelan, and I read this letter, which was probably the cause of the unhappy man's suicide. It informed him that he was about to be arrested."

"And so Mademoiselle de Maugars is really free?" muttered Guy.

"Free as air, my dear Guy. Do you understand now why I blew the horn? A good idea, wasn't it? Well, let us talk now of the changed aspect of affairs since this unexpected suicide. Will you now refuse to go with me to Vésinet?"

"No, uncle, and yet—"

"What?"

"The voluntary death of this man seems so strange to me that I can scarcely believe it."

"You would believe it if I showed you the certificate of death?"

"Have you got one?"

"No, but Monsieur Frédoc will bring it with him."

"To day?"

"I think not, for the necessary formalities will take up some little time—some days, perhaps. That is what Monsieur Frédoc will probably tell us."

"He undertook, then—"

"To go to the prefecture of police and to see that the matter was properly looked into. I could not do this, as I had never seen Estelan; and so he consented to undertake the unpleasant task with a good grace, for which I felt greatly obliged to him. You were right in believing him to be a true friend, and I asked him to be mine also, to which he cordially assented. We shall take him with us this autumn to La Bretèche, and next year he shall come to your wedding. But we have not got so far as that as yet, and I advise you to eat your breakfast. My news, I presume, has brought back your appetite. When we have finished, and after taking coffee, I will have a nap on one of the divans in your dressing-room. I shall go to sleep after I have taken a few puffs at a cigar. You can do the same if you like, and Frédoc will wake us up before dinner-time."

"I shall scarcely be able to close my eyes," muttered Guy, but he made up his mind to breakfast, and his uncle tried in every way to cheer him. He finally succeeded in doing so, and the repast ended almost gaily.

Souscarriere made no end of jokes, and it never once entered his mind to regret the poor fellow who had so opportunely departed this life. The assurances of M. Aubijoux as to Estelan's innocence did not weigh with the old soldier in the least. Bautru said less, and more quietly congratulated himself upon the happiness of being able to love Madeleine de Maugars without exposing himself to great suffering.

The time spent in waiting for Frédoc seemed very long, and he thought over a great many things while his uncle was sound asleep—of Madeleine, first of all, and next of the happy future which awaited them if she consented to marry him after she had laid aside her widow's weeds. Then he thought of his debts, of the note he had given to the money-lender to whom Rangouze had sent him, and at last, at about six o'clock, a ring at

the bell interrupted his reflections. He at once aroused his uncle, who sat up and welcomed Frédoc with the curt ejaculation : " Well ? "

" Well," replied Frédoc, " I was right. It is he."

" Has he been recognised ?" asked Souscarrière.

" Yes, so far as it was possible to recognise him in the state in which the shot had left him. The prefect proceeded with dispatch and intelligence. He immediately informed the commissary and the officers who had the matter of Estelan's arrest in hand on his wedding-day, and they all declared that the description coincided with that of the disfigured face."

" Did they find no papers upon the body ?"

" None whatever. There was nothing to show who he was. The clothes were those of a fashionable man, but the tailor's name was not on them ; the linen, which was very fine, had the mark effaced ; and the pockets did not contain either any money or any papers."

" But there's the letter to prove the identity."

" And this proof appeared sufficient. The writing was examined, and it was shown that it was in the same hand as the denunciations of Estelan which had been addressed to the public prosecutor's office. The magistrates found an explanation of this circumstance, which I must admit surprised me greatly. They think that the anonymous accuser suspected that Estelan was hiding in some house known to him, and that he sent this note there to make him leave it and blackmail him, for the information was false. In reality, the police had not found out where Estelan was hidden. It is supposed that, frightened by the note, and fearing to compromise the friend who had received him, as well as despairing of escape, he lost his head, and made up his mind to die secretly ; moreover this resolve was perhaps due to a feeling of revenge as regards Monsieur de Maugars."

" Yes, that was it," said Souscarrière. " He thought that his wife, being ignorant of his fate, would never be able to marry again."

" But, then," said Bautru, " why didn't he destroy the letter which was addressed to him ?"

" Bah ! when a man is going to kill himself he doesn't think of everything. Pray go on, my dear Monsieur Frédoc. What does the commissary's report say ?"

" It enumerates all the circumstances of the suicide and the facts which seem to prove that the dead man is really Estelan. But the body must be placed where it can be seen for seventy-two hours, as is the rule."

" That is what I call a useless formality. It is clear that the persons who know Estelan are not in the habit of going to the Morgue." *

" No, of course not. But they can be called upon to go there."

" The deuce ! that would be very disagreeable as regards Maugars. The papers will talk about all this, and his son-in-law's name will be brought forward again."

" I said so to the commissary. He talked of calling upon Monsieur de Maugars himself, and taking him to see the body. But he yielded when I reasoned with him and told him that the law had no interest in noising this lamentable affair abroad, and that it would be very cruel to subject the count to such a horrible ordeal. So he promised me that

* The Parisian charnel house where the corpses of strangers are exhibited for identification.

Monsieur de Maugars should be spared. I even hope that my testimony will be thought sufficient, and that no one will be called upon to view the body."

"The certificate of death will be given in three days, will it not?"

"That is probable, but not certain. The police are always mistrustful, you know. They will perhaps insist upon certainty as to some points which are now rather dark. They want to find out what Estelan has done with his property."

"It consisted, I believe, in personal property. He must have transferred it to the friend who sheltered him. It seems to me, besides, that this is of no importance."

"I said the same. I was questioned as to Estelan's acquaintance in Parisian society, and I replied that I only knew him by sight, and that a mere chance had brought me into the matter, that of a ride in the Bois de Boulogne, and that I had intervened only to oblige Monsieur Souscarrière, a friend of the Count de Maugars, who was with me when the shot was fired."

"You did not speak of Monsieur Aubijoux, then?"

"No. I thought it best to leave him out of the inquiry, if there be one. Aubijoux is a worthy man, but he is unreasonable, and when he forms an opinion he will never give it up. If he were told that Estelan had killed himself, he would begin by raising an outcry; he would tell everybody of his favourite's tragic death, and would not fail to accuse Monsieur de Maugars of having driven him to it."

"Yes, he would very likely do so; and, unfortunately, he will always know that Estelan has killed himself, since he knows where he was hiding. He told us that at the ball."

"Yes, but Aubijoux is not in Paris just now. I went to his office when I left the prefecture. I wanted to find out whether Estelan had written to him before he blew his brains out. But Aubijoux's secretary told me his master had left Paris this morning."

The uncle and nephew exchanged glances. "Where has he gone, and when will he return?" asked Souscarrière.

"I can't tell you," replied Frédoc. "Aubijoux never acts as other people do. He never says where he is going, nor how long he will be absent. He says that is the way to do the kind of business he does, and perhaps he is not wrong. He has probably received a letter from one of his correspondents who wishes to conclude an important bargain in some country or another, and so he has taken the first train. He will come back when he has transacted the business he has in hand."

"Yes. It won't be to-morrow or the next day, most likely, as his largest transactions are in America. When he reappears Estelan's suicide will be an old story, and Maugars will be far from Paris."

"Ah! then Monsieur de Maugars has made up his mind to leave the country house which he has just hired?" said Frédoc.

"I shall get him to do so. Vésinet is too near the Place de la Trinité."

"I hope that the count does not intend to go abroad, especially as he is now rid of this unlucky son-in-law."

"No, but he would do well to live differently. He ought to let the talk die out; then every one will forget poor Madeleine's mishaps. The only way to silence the evil tongues around him is to live in the provinces. Maugars won't shrink from that when he knows that his daughter is a widow."

"And that she can marry again in ten months," added Frédoc, smiling.

"I see, dear sir, that you understand what I mean."

"I have no great merit in so doing, as you spoke of your projects in the Bois de Boulogne this morning."

"They will be carried out as I wish, I'll wager. My friend will come to visit me with his daughter, to wait until the law allows her to marry my nephew. La Bretèche isn't the kind of place where Maugars would have stayed as long as Estelan lived, but matters have changed now."

"Do you think that he will go there with you? Hasn't he interests which keep him in Paris?"

"None but some matters to transact with his notary. He confided all his fortune to him, and I am going to advise him to take it back and purchase a place which is for sale at about a mile from mine, and which is just the thing to suit him."

"Do you think he will take your advice?"

"I am sure he will. He had made up his mind to go to Anjou, and now that his daughter is free he will not hesitate to profit by the opportunity—an opportunity such as seldom presents itself, for the place I speak of is in very good condition, the land is excellent, and it is all to be had cheap. The present owner is a Nantes merchant who needs money and will sell at any price. But he must make haste, for purchasers are not wanting. However, the settlement with Prunavaux won't take much time, and I hope that in a week from now all will be arranged."

"In a week from now?—yes, possibly," muttered Frédoc.

"Monsieur de Maugars will do as well to make haste for more than one reason," said Bautru.

"What!" exclaimed Souscarrière, "are not his funds in good hands?"

"I think that they had better be invested in lands and forests."

"Explain yourself more clearly, pray. Have you any reason for doubting Monsieur Prunavaux's honesty?"

"No. But I don't feel the same confidence in him that I once did."

"My dear Bautru," said Frédoc, "you have a spite against him because he helped to bring about Mademoiselle de Maugars' marriage."

"The fact is," grumbled Souscarrière, "that he acted very lightly in this matter, and ought to have made more inquiries."

"No, it isn't that."

"I remember meeting that singer, Antonia, coming out of his office."

"It isn't Antonia that I am thinking of."

"But why do you doubt the notary? He made a fool of himself, I admit, in going to Madame Aubijoux's ball dressed as a Turk, and in guaranteeing Estelan, but—"

"I refer to a few words which I overheard at that very ball."

"What was it that you heard?"

"You were with me, Frédoc. We were walking along one of the avenues of the park, and Monsieur Aubijoux, who was behind the hedge, said to Prunavaux—you recognised the voice:—'I don't do business of this kind; I'm not a money-lender.' I concluded that Prunavaux was trying to borrow money of him, and when a notary does that—"

"He makes a mistake," interrupted Frédoc. "But I am sure that Prunavaux was speaking in the name of some client. He has no need to borrow for himself. If Aubijoux were here, he would assure you of it."

"I believe you," said Guy's uncle, "and my nephew really attaches too much importance to a few words he overheard. Besides, Prunavaux

would not fail so suddenly, and I hope that next week Maugars will have his money. Let us talk of other matters. It is too late to tell Maugars to-night about the death of his unfortunate son-in-law; but I will go and see him to-morrow and inform him of it, and my nephew will join me at Vésinet in the afternoon. What day would it suit you, my dear friend, to be introduced to the count and his daughter?"

Frédoc seemed surprised and almost annoyed by this question, although he ought to have expected it, as it had already been brought forward in the Bois de Boulogne.

"I should feel greatly honoured, sir," he said, after a little hesitation, "by an acquaintanceship with the Count de Maugars; but my visit would now be premature, I think. I would rather wait until our uncertainties are over. If we are mistaken, and Estelan still lives, it will be a cruel blow to Monsieur de Maugars, and I should not like to see his grief."

"I understand your feelings and I will say no more," replied Souscarrière. "In a few days from now we shall not feel the same hesitation, and we will then call on Maugars together. Between now and then you must allow me to call and thank you, and inquire how matters progress, for I rely upon your kindness to finish the important affair which you have begun so well."

Frédoc protested that he was still at Souscarrière's disposal and took his leave, bearing away with him the blessings of both the uncle and the nephew.

VII.

FOUR days after Souscarrière's ride in the Bois de Boulogne with M. Frédoc, he and Guy with M. de Maugars, his daughter, and the Marchioness de Puygarrault sat together in the garden of the villa which the count had rented at Vésinet. This garden was very large and umbrageous; the house was spacious, convenient and agreeably situated. A fine road led past it, and there were no annoying neighbours. The woods were near at hand. In this corner of a country suburb which is only a village in name, for the houses are wide apart, one might fancy one's self a hundred miles from Paris. It was here M. de Maugars had sought for solitude and here he had found it.

Souscarrière was the only friend whom he had at first received. Then he had decided upon sending for his cousin, the marchioness, to cheer Madeleine by her companionship. But the poor girl hardly knew how to sustain the severe shock she had received, and the consolations of the marchioness had failed to calm her grief.

However, Guy had come, Guy whom she had loved as the heart loves at sixteen, and Madeleine had become more cheerful. Had she loved Louis d'Estelan also? She did not know herself. Her father had told her one day long past that he did not wish to receive Guy de Bautru any more as a visitor, as he led a gay life, and it was not worth while for a young lady of good position to trouble her head about him. She had shed many tears, but had not attempted to defend him. She did not at first understand what he was accused of, but she at last believed that he had forgotten his love for her, and she determined to forget the unfaithful man in her turn. Guy, who was wounded by M. de Maugars' proceedings, had done nothing to change this opinion, and Madeleine, believing that

he had renounced her, willingly received the new suitor whom her father brought forward at the end of the winter.

Louis d'Estelan was young, good looking, with distinguished manners and a dignified bearing. He looked serious, even sad. This was not displeasing to Mademoiselle de Maugars, and she accepted his attentions. He carried on an unobtrusive, almost timid courtship. It would almost have seemed that he had divined the true feelings of the young girl, who had scarcely forgotten her first love. However, she adored her father, who greatly wished her to marry Estelan. So she consented to do so, not joyfully, by any means, but without repugnance. Then, little by little, she had appreciated the good qualities of the suitor whom she had at first merely accepted through submission: she had become acquainted with his simple goodness, his upright character, and his mild disposition. He did not talk the fashionable slang of Paris, but his words were frank and sensible, and he was manly. He talked to her of his travels, his adventures in Mexico, and how, by dint of perseverance, he had attained fortune through many dangers and trials.

He described that strange country, the "warm land" which reminded Madeleine of the State of Louisiana, where she was born, and she liked to listen to his dramatic account of it. She was ignorant of life, and not able to analyse her feelings towards Louis d'Estelan. When he was beside her she felt no emotion and the sound of his voice did not go to her heart, nor did she blush when their eyes met, but these signs of love of which she had given evidence with Guy had left an almost painful remembrance, and she was happy that they did not return. "*I love differently,*" she thought, "and this, no doubt, is the love which does not bring suffering with it."

M. de Maugars encouraged her as well as he could in this change of feeling. He constantly repeated to her that all deep love was a source of grief, and that true happiness consisted in calm affection; that she had been perfectly happy until Guy had come to trouble her life, and would again be so when she had married an excellent young man who would know how to protect and cherish her as her father had done. Was he sincere in praising calm affection, although he had led a wild life, and had by no means "settled down" in middle age? It may be that he was, and that he knew what giving way to the follies of passion meant, and dreaded any other life but a calm one for Madeleine.

However, by a strange spirit of contradiction, he scarcely seemed to appreciate the merits of the son-in-law whom he had almost picked out, as it were, and thrust upon her. He praised him, upheld him, but did not seek his society. He was reserved in his courteous relations with Estelan, and it was easy to see that the friendship which he thought himself called upon to show him was but a friendship of duty, just as the marriage of his daughter was a marriage of duty. The two men were not suited to each other. This was made clear enough when an unforeseen catastrophe burst the bonds which held them to each other. Madeleine wept for Louis d'Estelan, but Maugars cursed him.

On the day when Souscarrière went to tell the count that the unfortunate man had committed suicide in expiation of his sin, Maugars was the first to ask Guy de Bautru to resume his visits, although he had previously driven him away and spoken ill of him to his daughter.

But since he had talked frankly with his old comrade, since he had soothed his mind by telling him why he had hesitated in choosing a husband for his daughter, he wished above all things that she might marry

this same Bautru whom he had treated so ill in former days. Madeleine was much more reserved towards Gny, whom she could not meet without emotion, although she strove to overcome it, reproaching herself for her own weakness, mistrusting herself, and feeling that she had too soon forgotten the unhappy man whose name she bore.

She was surprised to hear her father now talk so enthusiastically of Guy, praise his good qualities, excuse his faults, and declare that he intended to go to Anjou and live near the uncle and the nephew. It sometimes seemed to her as though she had had an evil dream, that she had never married or never ceased to love Guy de Bautru, who now stood before her, seeming more ardent than ever, and nearer her heart's ideal. The image of Louis d'Estelan grew fainter and fainter in her mind, just as evening clouds fade in the distance and pass away.

A few days had sufficed to change every heart. Madeleine had begun to hope once more; the count had raised his head like some strong oak bowed down for the time by the wind, but which rises again after the storm is over. Souscarrière, proud of having manoeuvred so skilfully, did not doubt but what he had brought about the happiness of all he loved, and indulged in many dreams. Guy, who was now very steady and at peace with every one, let himself glide along the tide of new-found bliss. And he felt that he owed much of this happiness to M. Frédoc.

That phoenix of bachelors had taken infinite pains to serve his young friend's interests. He had done everything and well. The public prosecutor, the prefect of police, and the subordinate officials, had been constantly interviewed by him after the discovery of Estelan's body. He had prevented the insertion of any reports in the newspapers, had spared M. de Maugars the painful "viewing of the body," and had even prevented any summoning of others to view it, when it was, for form's sake, exposed at the Morgue. The letter found beside the dead man established his identity with a certainty which made any further information appear unnecessary.

On the fourth day Frédoc had called at the Rue Anber to inform Souscarrière and Bautru that nothing further would be done in the matter. The certificate of death had not yet been made out at the registry, but it was promised. Bautru had been profuse in his thanks, and Souscarrière had embraced the old bachelor and hugged him to his broad breast, almost smothering him in proof of his gratitude.

The uncle and nephew even did their best to induce him to go to Vésinet, but he excused himself so persistently as somewhat to surprise them. He gave very unsatisfactory reasons for his refusals. He did not wish, he said, to make a merit of a service which any gentleman would have rendered to the Comte de Maugars, and he feared that by making such a visit he would seem to be fishing for thanks.

Souscarrière attributed this exaggerated discretion to a feeling of pride which he did not altogether dislike. But Bautru, who knew Frédoc better, explained it otherwise, and ascribed it to modesty and a kind of bashfulness. Frédoc was an amiable philosopher, gay by nature, and solitary by system. He welcomed those whom he liked, but did not seek them; and though he willingly went to such places as clubs and theatres, which are neutral ground, he fled from society, properly so-called. It was not surprising, then, that he showed no desire to make new acquaintances.

Souscarrière agreed with his nephew that as M. de Mangars was the

person to whom the service had been rendered, he ought to make the first advances and write to Frédoc to express his gratitude, and then call upon him to thank him once more.

Having made up their minds on this subject, they took the train and went to pass the day with the count. The great news they brought with them was rapturously welcomed by Maugars, who, for the first time since Estelan had disappeared, felt himself secure from the terrible eventualities he had feared.

Madeleine, surprised to see Guy gayer and more attentive than before, allowed herself to be won to content, such as she saw on his face, and of which she could not guess the cause, since from the day of her wedding she had believed herself to be a widow. However, joy is as contagious as sadness.

Madame de Puygarrault, although less demonstrative than her cousin, was in reality as well satisfied as he was, for from the first day she had known the true state of things, and the death of Madeleine's unhappy husband relieved her of great anxiety.

The dinner lasted a long time. Souscarrière made himself very agreeable, and, but for Madeleine's mourning attire—and she alone wore it, the count and the marchioness having decided not to assume it—nothing would have recalled the recent misfortune. After dinner they all went into the garden to enjoy the coolness of the fine summer evening.

Madeleine and Guy were conversing in a low tone, Maugars and Souscarrière were smoking, and the marchioness was drinking tea. "My children," said the old lady, all at once, "oblige me by finding my shawl. I left it just now on a bench somewhere down in the little wood behind the house. Madeleine, you can find it, and Guy can carry it."

The two young people asked nothing better than to go off by themselves, and when they had disappeared round a pathway, Madame de Puygarrault exclaimed, shaking her head :

"Do you know, my dear Souscarrière, that your nephew is a strange fellow?"

"What is there strange about him, my dear marchioness?" asked the ex-colonel.

"Well, he is like a weathercock, he veers with every wind. Last year he adored my little cousin. I encouraged him in the laudable intention of marrying her, and he declared that such a marriage would fulfil every wish of his heart. Then all at once he disappeared. He took offence at not being welcomed with sufficient warmth by Maugars, who did wrong, I admit, in receiving him so coldly. But after he disappeared, the count could scarcely be expected to wait till he chose to re-appear."

"I condemn his disappearance, marchioness," replied Souscarrière, "but I don't know what you wish to conclude from what you say."

"I wish to ask you if, this time, his conversion is sincere. The prodigal son has returned home, but nothing proves that he won't be off to his Parisian frivolity again."

"What makes you think that? Can't you see that he is madly in love with Madeleine?"

"I see that he pays her a great deal of attention, so much indeed that the poor girl is quite disturbed by it. He carries on as though he expected to go to the altar with her next week. But I suspect that he is dissembling. If he were as much in love as he professes to be he wouldn't think of amusing himself and going to fancy balls."

"Excuse me, my dear marchioness but——"

"And such a fancy ball, too!" interrupted the marchioness; "almost a public affair, to which all the people in Paris were invited by a certain Madame Aubijoux. Where did she come from, this brand-new princess? From behind some counter, I'll venture to say."

"Madame Aubijoux is the wife of a merchant who is worth twenty millions," replied Souscarrière, somewhat taken aback, "and I assure you, marchioness, that she receives very good society. But how on earth did you know that my nephew had been to her house?"

"You forget, my dear sir, that these people have their guests' names inserted in the newspapers, together with a description of their entertainments. I had the pleasure of reading in the *Gazette de France*, to day, that Monsieur de Bautru wore the superb costume of a nobleman of the time of Charles IX. at Madame Aubijoux's ball. The next time he will be appearing as a minion of the time of Henri III."

"Is this true?" asked M. de Maugars, frowning.

"Yes, it is quite true," replied Guy's uncle. "What harm do you see in it?"

"What harm?" exclaimed the marchioness. "I declare it to be most indecent to visit a mere upstart when a man bears the name of Bautru, and the Maugars family is in mourning."

"The fact is," muttered the count, "that the moment was badly chosen. Your nephew knew what trouble we were in."

"So did I, and yet I went to the ball."

"You, Souscarrière? That is still worse. Were you in fancy dress, too?"

"Yes, marchioness, I went as a knight in complete armour."

"Theu it was you whose fine bearing and majestic appearance were praised in the papers? 'A warrior in steel, who looked as though he had escaped from an armoury, was much remarked,' said the report. Let me congratulate you, my dear friend. You are becoming a man of fashion, I see."

"What! at your age? Do you really go in for that sort of thing?" growled Maugars.

"The deuce take it! I had my reasons. If I honoured Madame Aubijoux's ball by appearing at it, it was solely on your account."

"On my account?"

"Why, yes. This woman's husband is the merchant whose name you forgot, and who recommended Estelan to your notary. I obtained that information from Pruneaux himself, and I seized upon the opportunity for entering into relations with the nabob in question."

"You saw him, then? What did you say to him?"

"Thiugs which are no longer of any interest to you since Estelan is dead. But I don't regret having become acquainted with Monsieur Aubijoux, as I met Monsieur Frédoc there."

"For a woman to play the great lady, when she is named Aubijoux, is a little too much!" interrupted the marchioness. "What will become of us all, good heavens! And who is this fellow Frédoc? All these people have such odd and ridiculous names."

"Frédoc did us a great service, as you can't deny, marchioness. Without him we should still believe that Madeleine's husband was alive, and might re-appear, for the fellow who killed himself in the Bois de Boulogne would probably not have been recognised. The body would

have remained in the thicket no one knows how long. The wind would have carried away the letter or the rain would have destroyed it. It is to Frédoc that we are indebted for the removal of this sword of Damocles."

"I owe him my gratitude, and I shall certainly call upon him and thank him," said M. de Maugars; "he is about the same age as ourselves, is he not?"

"A little older than we are, I believe, but he looks younger. He is a man whom you would like, I'm sure. He has a kind face and frank manners, which pleased me at once."

"He is a gentleman, of course?"

"Certainly, as he is Guy's friend."

"And he must be wealthy."

"I think he is. Guy told me that he lent money to all his young friends at the club."

"He must once have led the same life as we did. I am surprised that we have never met."

"I don't think that he has always lived in Paris. My nephew has only known him for three years. I have been living in the country for eighteen, and you stayed a long time in America, mind, and since your return you have lived in retirement. I can easily understand why we have never heard him spoken of."

"I have never heard him spoken of, either," said Madame de Puygarrault, "and yet for thirty years I have never left the Rue Saint-Guillaume, and I know who everybody is. If this Frédoc were anybody, I should have heard him mentioned."

"Well, he doesn't go into the society that you belong to, but he goes into other society. Paris isn't confined to the Faubourg Saint-Germain, my dear marchioness."

"My dear Souscarrière, I do not dispute your Frédoc's merits. But, before I make any one's acquaintance I like to know who he is. Maugars ought to go to thank this gentleman, but I prefer that he should come here. A burnt child dreads the fire, and a scalded cat is afraid of cold water. If my much-honoured cousin had gone to work more carefully he would never have encumbered himself with a suspicious son-in-law at all."

"I have been sufficiently punished for my carelessness, and it is superfluous to reproach me with it now," said the count, petulantly.

"Especially as the evil is repaired," added Souscarrière.

"What do you mean by repaired?" exclaimed the marchioness. "Do you think that Estelan's death will stop the scandal which is running about Paris? Madeleine is, very fortunately, a widow, but no one will ever forget that she married a thief."

"Marchioness! for mercy's sake!"

"My dear sir, I am seventy years old. So I may be allowed to speak as I think. Maugars has acted with unparalleled levity, and I think that he consoles himself far too easily for his daughter's misfortunes. As for your nephew, I should be delighted if Madeleine became his wife, but I should like to have proof that he deserves her. Do you answer for him? Can you think, and do you swear, that he has altogether given up 'driving Satan's Coach'?"

"I can, and he only asks to prove it by coming to stay at La Bretèche, and I intend taking everybody there, including you yourself, marchioness."

"That remains to be seen. I haven't yet decided to leave my rooms to live in your bachelor's hole, where it must be as cold as in Greenland."

I'll venture to say that it is surrounded by a moat, and that the moat is full of frogs. The croaking of those frightful things would keep me from sleeping. But I don't blame Mangars for buying an estate there near you, and going to live there with Madeleine. It is the best thing he can do at present. I think it as well, too, that Guy should go to Anjou with you. But what may he be leaving behind him?"

"Debts, marchioness; nothing more."

"That is more than he ought to leave."

"I'll pay them."

"Still, that won't prevent him from being ruined. I am told that his last farm is for sale."

"Who told yon that?"

"Pruneaux. His brother notary down there wrote to ask him to announce the sale in the Paris papers."

"Pruneaux is a fool. He ought to keep people's business to himself. Besides, even if my nephew is ruined he won't be so for long, for I shall secure all my property to him on his wedding-day."

"You had much better settle it on Madeleine, for Guy will spend it all, just as he has spent his own."

"Cousin," said the count, abruptly, "you seem to be trying to discourage us all. It isn't generous on your part, and if I didn't know that your heart was good, I should think that yon were turning against us when we most need the help of all our friends."

"You know very well that I love you in spite of your faults," rejoined the marchioness, "and that I love your daughter as though she were my own."

"You have proved it to ns, and I hope that yon already feel that it is cruel to trouble our joy. But I must tell you that even if Gny de Bautru were as poor as Job, he would be a very good husband for Madeleine, and that if he asks her hand in marriage a year from to-day, I shan't refuse an alliance which honours both her and me."

"And you are right, cousin. I should have liked to hear you speak like that before, and I beg you to believe that I have nothing against the dear boy, nothing serious, at all events. I think him rather frivolous, and rather subject to bad tempers, like his uncle—"

"Thanks, marchioness," said Souscarrière.

"But he has his uncle's good qualities, and I am sure that if he chooses he will make Madeleine perfectly happy. It is my friendship for them both that leads me to inquire what frame of mind he is in. If I did not love them, I shouldn't say a word. I am satisfied now, and will say no more. We will marry them to each other. Besides, between ourselves," added the marchioness, laughing, "it would be rather late to make objections. They have been together for the last three days, and they act as though they had never parted."

"Allow me to remark that this proves that my nephew has never ceased loving Madeleine, my dear madame."

"And that Madeleine has never forgotten your nephew. Oh ! I don't find fault with her for that. Mangars gave her to Estelan without consulting me. It was a hasty marriage, like my own. I was only eighteen when my father said : 'My daughter, allow me to introduce you to the Marquis de Puygarrant. You will marry him in six weeks.' I cast down my eyes and said, 'Yes,' although the poor marquis was nearly forty, and very ugly. I maintain that Madeleine is much more excusable than I for

having consented, for Estelan was very handsome. She would probably have ended, like myself, by becoming attached to her husband, but she did not have time to do so. And I think it quite natural that she should have returned to Guy without wavering. A hypocrite would pretend to hesitate, while Madeleine follows her inclinations, and I like her frankness. But," resumed the marchioness, after a short pause, "what a time it takes her to get me my shawl!"

"She is probably looking for it."

"She is not looking in the right place. Guy prevents her from knowing what she is about. Maugars, you had better go and see what those two children are doing. The garden is very large, and at the back of the house there are some woods that go off, heaven knows where!"

"Besides, the sun has set while we have been talking, and it is almost night," said Souscarrière. "Stay here, Maugars. I will go myself."

"No need of it," replied the count. "I see Madeleine coming."

"Without my shawl," added Madame de Puygarrault.

"And without your nephew," observed M. de Maugars.

"Where the deuce has he gone?" muttered Souscarrière.

"We shall soon know. Madeleine is coming towards us as though she had some news to tell."

The marchioness was right. Madame d'Estelan was coming hastily towards them, and from her appearance it seemed as if something unusual had happened.

"Well," asked Souscarrière, "what have you done with Guy?" He had retained the habit of speaking very familiarly to Madeleine, as he had known her from her childhood.

"You look pale," exclaimed the count; "what has happened?"

"Nothing of any consequence, father," said Madeleine, who seemed trying to hide her anxiety.

"But where is Bautru?"

"He has left the garden."

"Left it; how?" said the marchioness. "There is no gate on that side."

"He leaped over the railing."

"What! over the railing?" said Souscarrière. "What did he perform that gymnastic feat for?"

"Come, Madeleine, tell us why you are frightened. Calm yourself," said M. de Maugars.

"And tell us where Guy has gone," added Madame de Puygarrault.

"I tried to detain him, but he went away in spite of me, and I am anxious because he went after a man."

"What man?" inquired the count.

"I will tell you all about it," said Madeleine, leaning upon her father's arm. "My cousin's shawl," she resumed, "was not on the bench where she left it, and I thought that Julie had perhaps taken it into the hot-house. I wanted to show Monsieur de Bautru a flower which the gardener could not tell me the name of, and we went along the path by the side of the railing——"

"Make haste, my dear Madeleine," exclaimed Souscarrière, who was beginning to feel annoyed by all this delay.

"Monsieur de Bautru stopped to show me a fine effect of light over the trees which are separated from our garden by the road—the reflection of the setting sun which was playing upon the leaves——"

"Madeleine, you are making us die of impatience!" exclaimed the marchioness.

"When I remarked a man who was leaning against the trunk of an old oak, and I pointed him out to Monsieur de Bautru. This man seemed to be looking at us, and when he saw that we had noticed him he tried to hide himself behind the trees. I should not have paid any attention to this proceeding, but Monsieur de Bautru did not like it. He looked attentively in the direction where we had seen the man, and found that he had disappeared. We thought he had gone off altogether, and we went towards the hot-house, where we did not find the shawl. I then saw that it had grown very late, and there was not light enough for me to find my flower. So we returned by the same path, when we saw the man again. This time he had come near to the hedge. He seemed to me to be tall and slight, but I could not distinguish his features. It was almost night."

"How was he dressed?" asked Souscarrière.

"Like a workman, so far as I could judge, with a low-crowned hat, and a blouse."

"Some Paris prowler, no doubt. People of that kind often show themselves about here, and I cannot imagine why Guy troubled himself about the fellow."

"I took him for a beggar, and I was going to fling him a few coppers when Monsieur de Bautru called out to him, and asked him what he was doing there. Instead of replying, the fellow ran off into the woods. It was then that Monsieur de Bautru climbed over the railing, after telling me to return to you."

"What ridiculous behaviour!" grumbled Souscarrière. "Does he mean to prevent people from looking at Maugars' villa?"

"I tried to detain him, but he was already out upon the road. He made me a sign with his hand, and ran into the wood. Then I became afraid, and I came back as fast as I could to tell you what had happened, as well as to beg my father to send some one to look for Monsieur de Bautru."

"The deuce take him!" grumbled Souscarrière; "let him take care of himself, as he is fool enough to run after a vagabond."

"But, father," entreated Madeleine. "I beg of you to call the manservant or the gardener! If Monsieur de Bautru were attacked he has no weapon to defend himself, and the man had a stout stick in his hand."

"She is right," said M. de Maugars. "The environs of Paris are full of rascals on the look out for some bad job or other. We can't let Guy remain alone with this fellow, who may have some comrades hidden in the woods. Come, Souscarrière, let us both go. We can get him out of his difficulties if he needs help."

"Certainly, and it is better not to say anything to your servants about such a foolish piece of business."

The count was standing and brandishing his cane as though it had been a sword, while Souscarrière broke a stout branch off a nut tree and prepared to accompany his old comrade.

"There is an opening on this side," said Maugars, "and the road passes by the house."

"Where are you going, little one?" called the marchioness, seeing that Madeleine was about to follow M. de Maugars and the colonel.

"I am going with my father, cousin," replied the girl. "I must show him where Monsieur de Bautru went."

"What do you mean, mademoiselle? Are you going to fight, like a boy?"

"It must be in the blood, madame," said Souscarrière, laughing. "Mademoiselle Madeleine is a soldier's daughter."

"Are you going to encourage her absurd caprices?"

"Yes, for the dear girl doesn't run the slightest risk, especially as we all go together. Won't you come, too? Why not? It is splendid weather, and a little exercise assists the digestion after tea."

"You are laughing at me, but I will show you that I, as well, have the blood of the Maugars in my veins. I won't leave my dear Madeleine to the care of two soldiers who might abandon her while they fought, if they had a chance to fight."

So saying, the old lady rose up and took the young girl's arm. Madeleine would gladly have escaped if it had been possible, but Souscarrière, laughing heartily, had hastened on to rejoin the count, and a moment later the whole party stood upon a wide road, bordered on one side by the garden railing, and on the other by a sparse wood. The men walked ahead and the women followed. This part of Vésinet is but little frequented. No one was to be seen upon the road, and no sound was heard except the dull rolling of a train as it steamed into the station a mile and a half away.

"I wonder what my nephew can mean by all this," grumbled Souscarrière. "I really begin to believe that he wants to make your daughter take him for a knight-errant, or something of that sort. This is what we call a *fantasia* in Africa."

"I think," replied Maugars, "that he did perfectly right to follow the man. A fellow prowling at night-time round a house in a lonely spot must be up to mischief of some sort. I have enemies, you know, my dear friend."

"Dismiss such thoughts as those, and try to be happy with Madelcine. Aha! we shan't have to look long! There comes my nephew, out on the road there, a hundred paces ahead."

"It may be the man himself. I can see nothing but a black outline."

It was, indeed, impossible to recognise any one at such a distance, for the night had fallen; still it was easy to see that the individual who had emerged from the wood was hastily approaching.

"It's Guy, I'll warrant!" said Souscarrière. "The man would have made off if he had seen us."

"It really is Monsieur de Bautru!" joyfully exclaimed Madeleine, who was now making the marchioness walk faster than she felt disposed to do. The young girl was not mistaken, and Guy, who heard her exclamation, ran forward to meet the party.

"Ah, here you are!" said his uncle; "be good enough to tell us what made you climb over a five-foot railing to start off after a tramp? Did you catch him?"

"No, although I ran pretty fast, but he was too far ahead, and I lost sight of him. He took advantage of the darkness to go off by some side road which I didn't know of. I thought I had him once, and I had almost caught him when he let this bouquet drop." Whereupon Bautru displayed a large bunch of roses which he held in his hand.

"Oho!" exclaimed Souscarrière, "this is something new. The robber is only a sweetheart bringing a bouquet on his lady-love's birthday."

"It is very strange!" muttered M. de Maugars.

"Good!" said the marchioness, "now you will take it into your head that he was bringing the flowers to Madeleine. Maids and cooks are not scarce about here, and even if there were nobody but Julie, that would account for it. She is a good girl, and by no means ugly, and she may have found an admirer in some kitchen gardener about here."

"Will you give me the bouquet?" said Madeleine, softly.

Guy, somewhat surprised, bowed and obeyed her. She took hold of the nosegay with the tips of her fingers and threw it scornfully out upon the road. "You don't think now that it was for me, do you?" she asked.

"I did not think so before," replied Bautru, at once.

"We are all children," said Souscarrière, who was laughing heartily at the little scene. "When I think that Guy is out of breath, and that we are all astir on account of a scamp in love with some servant girl, I must say that we act like fools. The mountain has brought forth a mouse. I suggest that we should go back to the house. Take my arm, marchioness, and let the young people go ahead."

Madame de Puygarrault accepted the offer, guessing her old friend's motives, and seeing no impropriety in allowing her little cousin to converse undisturbed with Guy de Bautru. The count, who also felt satisfied, joined the colonel and the marchioness, and the lovers walked along side by side.

"I was very much frightened," said Madeleine, in a low tone, to Bautru.

"What were you afraid of?"

"I was frightened on your account. I thought that the man might attack you, for you were alone in the woods. Didn't you think it would alarm me to go off as you did?"

"I certainly thought of you, for I think of you at all times."

"Then why didn't you say to yourself that I should be dreadfully alarmed? It was very wrong, and I beg that you won't try me like that again. Do you know that my father is thinking of buying an estate near your uncle's manor? We shall pass the autumn and winter there. Well, then, if you come to La Bretêche——"

"If I come!—I shall go when you do, and shall stay as long as you stay."

"Then you must promise not to run after danger in this way. I am sure that you are very reckless when you hunt, and that if your uncle did not restrain you, you——"

"I shall obey you in everything. You well know that I only live for you." And as Madeleine cast down her eyes without replying, Guy added: "Do you doubt that?"

"No," stammered the young girl.

"You have thought that I had forgotten you. You were told that I was leading a gay life, and that I had become unworthy of you. I was trying to forget you, but I have never ceased to love you devotedly. I swear this to you, Madeleine, and I beg of you to tell me if you still remember the time when there was no obstacle between us."

"I do remember it. Why should I hide that from you? I cannot say what is false."

"And now that you are free, will you suffer me to hope that when I can ask for your hand, you will——"

"Do not require an answer of me now," interrupted Madeleine. "It seems to me that Heaven would punish me if I confessed to you—you see

how disturbed I am—do you not read my heart? But later on—when I shall have laid aside this mourning attire, which reminds me of misfortune—I will—if your feelings have not changed—do as my father wishes."

Guy was about to reply, when his uncle stopped him.

"Halt, vanguard!" shouted Souscarrière, laughingly. "We have reached the garden gate, and it seems to me, young people, that you have had plenty of time to talk. I regret disturbing you, but I must be at the Café du Helder at half-past ten. An old regimental comrade is waiting for me there, and he is in trouble, so that my engagement with him must be kept. Take leave of your hosts, my lad, and let us return 'in good order' to the Vésinet station. It is 8.40, and the train leaves at 9.10."

Guy would have willingly prolonged so happy an evening, but he felt that he ought to spare Madeline's feelings at such a time, and she had already given him sufficient encouragement. He hoped, too, to see her on the next day. The count looked pleased, and the marchioness as well. The party broke up with kind words on all sides, and Maugars' last remarks to his friend Souscarrière were: "Don't forget to go to Pruneaux to-morrow, and tell him that I shall call on Tuesday morning to withdraw the funds which I entrusted to him. I have already apprised him by letter to get the money together. I wrote three days ago, and I expect him to be ready."

VIII.

M. Frédoc lived in the Rue de la Bienfaisance—Charity Street, as we should say in English—and this name might have served as a sign above his door, for not a needy man among the many who applied to him ever went away without ample alms. All the poor in the district knew the road to his abode.

Sceptical philosopher though he was, he spent a third of his income in good deeds like these. The old bachelor liked to go to the club or theatre of an evening, but all the same he took an interest in ferreting out hidden poverty, and often did he climb up black rickety stairs to take some family in distress the food they needed. He knew how to extend that help which checks the impecunious clerk on the road to ruin, and how to find work for women driven to despair, and shelter for helpless old men. Children were his especial favourites among the poor. He searched for them in hovels, picked them up when they were wandering about the streets, and found an asylum for them where they were cared for properly.

The gay young men to whom he lent money when they got into trouble by gambling did not dream that Frédoc divided his life into two parts and carefully concealed that which was devoted to charity. He avoided visits as far as possible, and had no intimate friends; and as his acquaintances of both sexes were in the habit of coming across him very often, they had no occasion to call upon him at home. He did not, however, carry the love of solitude so far as to refuse to receive those who called. He welcomed them cordially, and appeared glad to see them.

His rooms were cheerful. They were on the second floor of a handsome new house, and were comfortably furnished, but without luxury or distinctive characteristics. The drawing-room might have been a lawyer's, a merchant's, or a physician's. The dining-room looked like the refectory

of a convent ; the study like a minister's cabinet. There were plenty of pigeon-holes and green pasteboard boxes for papers, plenty of writing materials, but no books and no works of art. And in the bedroom there was not a single sentimental relic of the past, such as people advanced in life are fond of gathering about them. There was not even the picture of some ancestress. It seemed as though M. Frédoc had had no past.

He lived with a housekeeper who attended to everything, and who was at the same time his prime minister, so to speak. She might have been a priest's housekeeper, for she was old and serious, and had never been attractive. She dressed like a country woman, and never held any converse with the servants in the neighbourhood, although she did all the marketing and shopping herself. The tradespeople round about thought her very lofty, because she never gossiped, but the poor liked her because she inquired into their needs, and was always ready to tell M. Frédoc of their troubles. Brigitte belonged to a vanished race, that of the servants of past times who were born, and who lived and died in their employer's house, being handed down like heirlooms from father to son. They shared the joys and sorrows of the family, and ended by belonging to it, in point of fact, for they were treated like old friends.

Frédoc never went so far as to consult his housekeeper, like Molière, but had put her upon a footing of respectful familiarity which she was incapable of taking advantage of; and she knew more than any one else about the silent bachelor, for she had been with him for many years. She deserved the confidence placed in her, and her devotion was almost worship. It was said in the neighbourhood that she would have made any sacrifice to show her respect and attachment to her master.

On the morrow of the day when Guy de Bautru and his uncle went to Vésinet, and which was destined to be a memorable one to them, this pearl of housekeepers entered her master's room at noon to announce the arrival of a visitor. Frédoc was standing at a bay-window, so deeply absorbed in the contemplation of a small oval miniature which he held in his hand that if those indiscreet fellows Busserolles or Girac had come upon him unexpectedly, they would certainly have related that "the man without illusions," "the strongest-minded man about," as Frédoc's acquaintances very often called him, was still weak at times, for he actually went into dreamy ecstasies over a portrait. They would have remarked also that when Frédoc was at home, he was unlike the gay man at the club or Mabille, the lively companion who bore his sixty winters so well.

His pleasant, good-natured face had an extremely sad expression ; no smile played about his mouth ; his eyes were dull. He seemed to bear a load of grief, and looked almost aged.

"What do you want, Brigitte?" he asked, in a hoarse voice.

"Monsieur Pruneaux, the lawyer, wishes to see you."

Frédoc started. "Ask him to wait in the drawing-room," he replied. And, while Brigitte walked noiselessly away, he gave a last look at the locket, placed it in a rosewood desk and closed it carefully. The gilt key hung from his watch chain.

Then, drawing himself up, like a man who is preparing to be pleasant, he dismissed the gloom from his face, and his eyes grew mild again. This was the work of a moment. He entered the drawing-room with a smile, and held out both his hands.

Pruneaux was awaiting him, walking up and down the room. With stout persons this need of motion is almost always a sign of nervousness.

When a fat man's mind is at rest, his conscience at peace, he always prefers repose to motion. The notary looked careworn. His flabby face was pale, the perspiration stood in large drops upon his brow, and he seemed scarcely able to assume a look of composure as he replied to Frédoc's question—a very commonplace one :

"What brings you here so early?"

"I wish to ask a service of you," said Prunevaux.

It took him more than a moment to say these few words, which seemed to stick in his throat.

"A service? I must thank you for having thought of me, and I am entirely at your disposal. What is it?"

"I feel some hesitation in telling you, but you are the only man to whom I dare confess that I am in need of money."

"You!" exclaimed Frédoc. "You are looking for a loan like some gay fellow who has run into debt—you whom capitalists trust with their funds! This is really funny, and I should positively laugh if you didn't look so upset."

"There is no room for mirth, I assure you," sighed Prunevaux. "If I don't find this money soon I don't know what will follow."

"You have been making extravagant presents to that singer, Antonia, no doubt, and I fear that you have been squandering more money than you could afford."

"I have taken serious responsibilities upon myself on her account. She is to make her first appearance in opera this week."

"But if the matter proves a failure you are not obliged to pay."

Prunevaux did not answer, but hung his head.

Frédoc looked at him with a searching expression, and understood his silence and strange demeanour. "I must say that you alarm me," he remarked. "Have you gone even further than I thought?"

"Yes," rejoined the notary, with a painful effort.

"It is serious, then?"

"Very serious."

"This is bad! What amount do you need?"

Prunevaux still hesitated to speak. The sum was so large that he did not dare to name it. After hesitating a long time, he finally decided to use his eloquence. "Frédoc," said he, in a broken voice, "don't condemn without hearing me. You know that I love Antonia. Life as it was before I knew her had no temptations for me, but since that time I live indeed. You remember that my first acquaintance with her was due to the merest chance. She is not bad hearted, she is, in fact, true-hearted, but I can deny her nothing."

"I don't want to take you to task. But Antonia would spirit millions away just as Cleopatra melted pearls, for her own amusement. That is why she is called the 'Grasshopper.' She is utterly reckless in her expenditure, and her brain is like that of a bird. She never has a sensible idea. She will die in want, after reducing others to a like condition. I am ready, however, to help you. So I beg of you tell me all. What amount do you need?"

"Six hundred thousand francs," replied Prunevaux, when he had screwed up his courage by an immense effort.

"What! more than half a million gone in less than a year?"

"Yes, yes!" said Prunevaux, in the utmost dejection.

Frédoc shrugged his shoulders, and looked at the notary as a surgeon

looks at a serious pathological case, an extraordinary one, interesting to the practitioner but mortal to the patient. "My poor friend," said he, "I should have remonstrated with you long ago had I known that you had gone so far. But I will say no more. The evil is done. It must be repaired while there is yet time. I have asked you to make a clean breast of it. How do you stand?"

"I am driven to desperation," said Pruneaux, in a scarcely audible voice. "I have invested three hundred thousand francs in the theatre, which won't, however, be lost if the enterprise succeeds."

"And you think that it may?"

"Undoubtedly. The company is a good one, and Antonia has a wonderful voice."

"My dear Pruneaux," said Frédoc, in a tone of commiseration, "you are farther gone than I imagined. How can you seriously believe in the success of a lot of second-rate singers who have been got together to play comic opera at midsummer in a theatre which is no longer fashionable. It is natural that you should deceive yourself as to the Grasshopper's talent, but—"

"She might have sung at the Grand Opera had she wished."

"She ought to have taken the chance, then, if she had it, and you need not have sacrificed a hundred thousand crowns to bring her out."

And as Pruneaux looked down, Frédoc resumed: "Are you really so much in love with her as to do all this?"

"I love her so much that I have risked disgrace and ruin for her sake," said the notary, carried away by a passionate impulse which made him betray himself completely. "You will tell me that I am mad. I am! I see where I am rushing; the precipice yawns at my feet, but I cannot check my onward course. I might promise you to renounce Antonia, but I should not have the courage to do so. I haven't the strength of mind to live without her."

"How in the world has she succeeded in bewitching you to such an extent?"

"She has never attempted to bewitch me. She never laid any trap for me. She has never thought of my wealth. I offered everything. I rushed blindly towards certain ruin. And now, if I had to begin over again, I should act in the same way. You cannot understand all this, for life has been mild and staid with you. You were not brought up by a father who expected you to live on a hundred francs a month. You had a happy youth. But I passed through many trials and knew many privations. I have had burdensome duties in my profession, although my inclinations were against such seclusion as has been my lot. A day came when the very sight of the documents which I was forced to handle sickened my soul, and I absolutely hated the narrow-minded, sordid people about me. That day I broke my chains. I am forty years old, no doubt, fat, and ugly, and my conduct is absurd, besides being criminal. But let those who have never loved throw at me the first stone!"

This was said so feelingly, and with such an air of absolute sincerity, that Frédoc could not help shuddering.

"I shall cast none at you," he said. "The time would be a bad one. You are unfortunate and unhappy. I am your friend. Let us see how one can best help you. You need six hundred thousand francs?"

"More than that; but if I had that sum I might weather the storm. The danger is very great."

" You have used some of your clients' money, then ? "

" Yes, and immediate reimbursement is required."

" Whose money have you used ? "

" The Count de Maugars', which he gave me six months ago to invest in a first mortgage."

" Did he never ask you what you had done with it ? "

" When his daughter's marriage was talked of—the marriage which turned out so badly—he told me that he wished to settle two hundred thousand francs upon Mademoiselle de Maugars, and that I must have the money ready for Monsieur d'Estelan, her intended husband. I had the sum when the contract was drawn up, but it remained in my safe. Monsieur d'Estelan intended to take it out later, but you know that he disappeared. Now, Monsieur de Maugars claims this money in his daughter's name, as it was settled upon her, and at the same time requires the repayment of the surplus."

" Has he been to see you or did he write ? "

" Neither. He sent Monsieur de Bautru's uncle to me—that eccentric man whom you saw dressed like Don Quixote at Madame Aubijoux's ball. This man, Souscarrière, told me that his friend wished to employ his funds in purchasing an estate. The count knew that I had not invested the money, and I was obliged to say that I would repay it in a week. You see my terrible position, my dear Frédoc."

" So, if you cannot procure this six hundred thousand francs—"

" The chamber of notaries would force me to sell my charge at once."

" The sale would amply suffice to indemnify Monsieur de Maugars."

" Perhaps so, but I have other creditors. They don't demand immediate payment at present, but if they hear of this they will present themselves. I have looked every possibility in the face, even that of being publicly prosecuted. And as the clients who have deposited money with me will be ruined—for even the sale of my charge would still leave a large deficit—it is possible that the worst may come."

" What would you do in such a case ? "

" What you would do. I shouldn't outlive my disgrace."

" But you still hope to avoid it. What do you propose doing ? "

" If I repay Monsieur de Maugars all will be set right. I am interested in a matter which will give handsome dividends at a future time."

Frédoc wondered whether Antonia's lover alluded to the theatre which he had so foolishly rented, but abstained from asking the question.

" Let us admit," he said calmly, " that this would settle all your difficulties for the time being. Where will you procure six hundred thousand francs in one week's time ? You can't suppose that I am able to lend you such a sum of money. I don't possess it."

" I did not come to ask it of you. The way in which I have spoken proves that. If I had intended to ask such a sacrifice of your friendship I should not have accused myself before you of all my weaknesses as I have done."

" I do full justice to your frankness. But how can I be useful to you ? "

" You are intimately acquainted with Monsieur Aubijoux, are you not ? "

" Not intimately."

" I know that you are one of his friends, at all events, and I know that he has a special regard for you. I thought of asking him for a loan, and the other night, at his wife's ball, I——"

" You asked him for the loan and he refused it. I know that I

heard the last words which you spoke, and I can even repeat them to you."

"No need of that. I know them well enough. He very drily replied: 'I do business, but I don't lend money.'"

"There is nothing to be looked for from him, then. Aubijoux never changes his mind."

"I don't dream of borrowing money of him. But he might purchase an interest in an enterprise which is beyond me, but which might be very lucrative to him."

"In other words, you wish to give up your share to him, but your share in what?"

"In the affair of the theatre—the Fantaisies Comiques. He could double the amount invested in a very short time."

"Do you really think I could propose such a speculation to him? Really, my dear Pruneaux, you must be losing your mind, let me tell you. Aubijoux would laugh in my face; and I am surprised that you should seriously believe in the success of a theatre which will certainly be closed a month after it is opened."

"You are mistaken. All the other theatres of the kind have announced that they are about to close for the season. Their place must be filled. The manager told me so yesterday. Besides, Antonia will have stupendous success."

"The manager risks nobody's money but your own. He will take good care not to discourage you. Antonia must want to be hissed, and she will be hissed."

"You are very harsh, Frédoc," said the vocalist's lover, wounded as to what he held most dear.

"Harsh but wholesome, like a dentist's forceps. When you are cured, if I succeed in enring you, you will thank me for having deprived you of your dangerous illusions. Now, let us speak seriously. You need six hundred thousand francs at least?"

"Yes, at any cost."

"For how long?"

"For one year. In a year I shall have arranged all my affairs, and shall be able to return the amount."

"You must go to the money-lenders, then."

"I am willing, but I don't know any of them. Are there any who advance hundreds of thousands of francs?"

"All kinds of people are to be found in Paris. But these usurers call themselves capitalists. They only operate on a great scale, and don't offer their clients empty bottles and stuffed crocodiles, as in the good old times. They don't speculate upon the weaknesses of minors. No, they look out for rich borrowers of good position who are cramped for a time and forced to extremes, and, after making proper inquiries, they obligingly lend at thirty per cent. A notary is as good as bullion to them, and your six hundred thousand francs will only cost you two hundred thousand interest at the end of the year."

"I will submit to that, if I must."

"I can tell you of a man, then, who will fleece you, since you consent to be fleeced."

"You know such a man?"

"No, thank Heaven! My income is enough for me, and I have no dealings with these gentlemen. But one of my friends at the club knows

him, and recently recommended him to Monsieur de Bautru who raised the money he required through him."

"The deuce ! Monsieur de Bautru is the nephew of that Monsieur Souscarriere whom the Count de Maugars sent to withdraw the funds which he left in my hands."

"What does that matter ? Money-lenders are obliged to be discreet, and they don't reveal their clients' affairs. If you go to see this fellow he won't mention the young man to you, nor you to him."

"He lent him—"

"Thirty thousand francs, I believe."

"I need six hundred thousand," said Antonia's lover, dejectedly.

"Well, you offer twenty times the guarantee that Bautru did, for he is almost ruined. I repeat, the amount is not an insurmountable obstacle."

"And this man will keep the secret?"

"Don't doubt that, for his business is of a kind which, if it were known, would bring him before the correctional police. He will keep the thing quiet, you may be sure of it. You will receive your money down, and you will have to give him notes for eight hundred thousand francs without stipulation of interest."

"Yes; but if he puts the notes in circulation I should be in a bad plight. It is forbidden for a notary, under penalty of losing his charge, to sign a note at sight, or a bill."

"Do not fret about that; your signature won't leave his safe. It had better not be there at all ; but in your situation I don't see any other plan."

"I agree with you, and I only fear, alas ! that it may not be possible to carry it out. Just remember that I require this money in four or five days. Monsieur Souscarrière asked me to pay it back on Tuesday."

"And will make his appearance that day, you may be sure of it. His exactitude is that of a military man. But if the capitalist is willing to lend you the money, it won't take him forty-eight hours to make inquiries about you, as everybody in Paris knows who you are."

"Then, my dear friend, I have not a moment to lose, and I beg of you, as a favour, to go to this money-lender's house with me."

"Why should I go there ? He has never seen me, and my name would tell him nothing, for he has probably never heard it. My recommendation would have no weight with him."

"But how shall I approach him, if I am not recommended by some one?"

"In your place I should content myself with frankly setting forth the motive of my visit, giving some reason or other for needing the money."

"And if the man tells me that I am mistaken, that he does not lend at interest—or asks who sent me, what then?"

"Tell him that Monsieur Jules de Rangouze says that he does this business. You have met this Rangouze, haven't you, although you don't belong to our club?"

"Yes, I saw him lately at Monsieur Aubijoux's entertainment."

"Well, then, tell your money-lender that Monsieur de Rangouze spoke of him in your presence, and boasted of his open way of dealing, and that this gave you the idea of applying to him. It will be a white lie, but in such a fix as you are in—"

"I must ask his name and address," interrupted Pruneaux, without noticing the sarcasm in which Frédoc had ventured to indulge.

"Monsieur Guénégaud, No. 115 Rue des Vinaigriers."

"Is he there every day ?"

"From twelve till two."

"Well, I have a cab below, and I will go there. Thanks, my dear friend; if I succeed in arranging the matter with him, you will have saved my life. Not a word to Antonia!"

"No, you may be sure of that."

"I need not add that it would be very disastrous to me if Monsieur de Maugars or any of his friends knew that I was borrowing of a usurer."

"Don't fear. I have no connection whatever with Monsieur de Maugars, and his friends shall never know that you have done me the honour of telling me about your difficulties."

Pruneaux was about to ask for a less evasive answer when Brigitte reappeared. She looked like a servant who has a visit to announce, but intends to wait till her master is alone. The lawyer made haste to take leave. Frédoc accompanied him to the door, and when he shut it said to his housekeeper: "Did you see that man? Next week he will be in Mazas prison."

But Pruneaux did not hear this sinister prediction. He was going down stairs as fast as his short legs would admit of. He was in haste to see this money-lender on whom he founded his final hope. He sprang into the cab which awaited him, and while this modest equipage rolled on towards the Rue des Vinaigriers he thought no more of Frédoc than of his lost honour.

The unfortunate man had reached that height of folly, at which one cares no longer for the opinion of the world. He had not hesitated to confess his shameful acts to a man who was neither his relative nor his intimate friend. He did not hesitate, either, about going to a money-lender, one of those hard-fisted usurers, who made money out of the vices of others. He cared little for his professional dignity, but held it cheap. He thought only of Antonia, and if he so particularly wished to procure the money which he owed to M. de Maugars, it was less to avert an inevitable catastrophe than to procure the means of still leading the life which he had of late become accustomed to.

What did his dishonoured name matter to him, or his signature shut up in a bill discounter's safe, in company with the notes of gamblers and scamps of all sorts? Provided he could live as he had been living nothing affected him. And if the attempt which he was about to make failed, he did not intend to renounce Antonia. He wished to afford himself the stupid pleasure of seeing her, in short skirts, behind the footlights of a theatre which he had hired with the money he had stolen. All the rest was nothing. His plans were all laid. A notary who is about to make a mess of it does not wait to disappear until his last thousand franc note has vanished. Pruneaux had taken his precautions; he still had a well-filled portfolio in his pocket, and he was quite ready to bolt, for he imagined that the Grasshopper would willingly consent to sing abroad, so as not to separate herself from the ridiculous-looking lover who was burning his ships for her sake.

The Count de Maugars reduced to misery in his old age was of no importance to Pruneaux, nor cared he for the fate of Madeleine married to Estelan, for whom he had been guarantee. Antonia was always before his eyes. Her seductive image pursued him everywhere; he had seen her in his mind when he reached Frédoc's rooms, and when his cab drew up before the door of the house where M. Guénégaud lived, he seemed again to behold her before him.

The sight of the house somewhat startled him. The Rue des Vinaigriers is not one of those streets where large capitalists willingly locate themselves as a rule. Starting from the Boulevard de Magenta, it ends at the Canal Saint-Martin, and none of the houses are handsome; indeed, the oldest and shabbiest of all bore the number mentioned by Frédoc. It was a decayed-looking building with a tumble-down frontage bulging out upon the street. There were five storeys with narrow windows, a narrow door, and a couple of dirty shops.

Pruneaux could not recover from his astonishment, and began to think it idle to try to borrow six hundred thousand francs from a man who lived in such a hovel. He would not retreat, however, for he had made up his mind to try any means of getting out of his difficulties, and so he plunged boldly into a dark alley, at the end of which an old woman crouched back in her room like a spider in a hole in the wall.

"Monsieur Guénégaud? On the second floor," grumbled the old witch, after looking at the visitor from head to foot.

The notary passed on with his head down, and climbed the stairs, involuntarily thinking of the handsome waxed staircase which led to his own office. After slowly climbing some thirty shaky steps, he came to a square landing, and saw in front of him a door decorated with a brass plate, on which were the following words in large letters: *Business Agency.* There was a dirty mat and a bell rope with a hare's foot affixed to it.

He felt disgusted at the sight, and thought for a moment of going away, but Antonia rose before him with her streaming hair, her smiling lips, and that silvery laugh which silenced him whenever he attempted to talk sense to her. So he closed his eyes and rang. A somewhat long pause followed the stifled sound of a slight tinkling.

"Has he gone out," thought the lawyer.

But suddenly the door was softly opened by a woman who was still young, and who had been very handsome; she wore a full Arlesian costume.

"Monsieur Guénégaud is busy," she said, with a marked southern accent; "but if you will come in and wait till he has finished talking I think that you need not wait long."

The notary had gone too far to draw back, and he allowed himself to be led through a dark entry into a small room, which might have passed for a shabby parlour, for it was furnished with two divans covered with worn-out moleskin, and four walnut chairs.

"Don't be impatient, sir," said the servant, pointing towards a door. "Monsieur Guénégaud is in his office. I will tell him that you are waiting for him and he will call you."

She then left Pruneaux to his anything but pleasant reflections. The shabby appearance of the hole in which he found himself did not give him a very lofty idea of the resources of the money-lender whom Frédoc had recommended to him. He said to himself that such people often try to put on poor appearances to hide their financial operations; that a man may live in a shabby-looking place and yet handle a large amount of capital, and that a usurer does not need to display luxury in order to attract custom; but he thought that M. Guénégaud's riches were all too well disguised, and he could scarcely believe that the pretended business agent had much money at his disposal.

"However," he muttered, as he walked up and down the floor of the homely waiting-room, "he lent some coin to Bautru. Frédoc told me so,

and he certainly did not invent that. Bautru is a little country gentleman who offers no great guarantee, while I—besides Guénégaud has other customers, as he is now receiving one while I am waiting."

The noise of a somewhat animated confab reached Pruneaux through the door which separated him from the private room. He could not hear what words were being said, but he clearly distinguished the sound of two voices, and it seemed to him that the noise grew gradually louder.

Then he suddenly heard an arm-chair pushed back by one of the speakers, who rose so quickly that the chair struck the door between the two rooms, and partially opened it. The locks were no better than the furniture at the residence of the capitalist of the Rue des Vinaigreries.

Pruneaux, who was quite startled, stopped walking up and down, and as he did so these words struck his ear, spoken by a sonorous voice which he easily recognised: "I tell you again that I won't go away until you give me back my note!"

The voice was that of Guy de Bautru, and Pruneaux's first impulse was to fly. Bautru had only to push the door which stood ajar open to be face to face with him, and if he did so the unfortunate notary was lost. His presence in such a place would clearly indicate the state of his affairs, and Bautru, who was M. de Maugars' friend, would not fail to tell the count of so strange a meeting.

But it was not easy to go away without being heard by the two men who were talking in the private room, and if Bautru, attracted by the sound of hurried footsteps, came to see who was there, he would catch Pruneaux on the wing. It was better to keep quiet, and this was what Antonia's lover decided to do. He remained in the place where he stood, motionless and mute, stifling his breath, his head bent forward, and listening, half dead with fright.

"Excuse me, sir," said a lisping voice which seemed to be M. Guénégaud's, "your note is not yet due. I am not obliged to give it back to you."

"You promised me that it should not leave your hands, so it must be here. It suits me to pay you before the time when it falls due. Here is your money. I want my note."

"I have not got it."

"You have not got it!" exclaimed Bautru; "you have dared to circulate it, in spite of your promise? That is a piece of rascality for which you shall pay dearly."

"No, no, your note is not in circulation, I give you my word of honour."

"Where is it, then?"

"In the hands of the capitalist who furnished the money. You know very well, my dear sir, that I was but an intermediary, a mere intermediary in this transaction."

"I know nothing about it, and I am not your 'dear sir.' You never said a word of all this when we treated together."

"Well, I'll tell you now. The money was not mine, unfortunately. There is a person who does not wish to be known in the matter on account of prejudices, you know. I only have my commission. And, naturally, as soon as the matter was arranged, I handed the note to the real lender. He risks his money; it is only right that he should be protected by your signature."

"And that he should give it back to me when I pay him."

"Of course; but the case of a client who wishes to pay before time is so rare that my principal could not foresee it."

"Go and tell him, and bring me my bill."

"It is impossible to do so to-day. I cannot see him till to-morrow, in the afternoon."

"Very well, then, I will return on the day after to-morrow. But I declare to you that if you don't give me back the paper which I was foolish enough to sign, I will at once enter a complaint against you at the public prosecutor's office. The law will discover your honourable associate, and we will see what it will say to your operations at forty per cent. You understand me, I presume? Good day."

M. Guénégaud grumbled out a few words which Pruneaux did not hear, and the noise of a door violently opened and shut apprised the notary that the interview was over.

Bautru's departure relieved him of great anxiety. He no longer feared being recognised by him, and he cared very little about the young man's quarrels with the money-lender. And, by listening at the door, he had obtained some information which gave him hope. M. Guénégand did not operate by himself. There was some "backer" behind the scenes. This explained everything, the street, the house, the rooms, and the furniture. This place was but a workshop where the business was carried on; but the strong-box was elsewhere, and nothing prevented it from holding millions.

Nothing hindered its opening to a Paris notary, "cramped for a time," as the saying goes, and Pruneaux made ready to speak.

He was arranging his opening speech when the door was thrown wide open and in stepped a man, whose face and bearing surprised him greatly, a tall fellow, with broad shoulders, a dark reddish complexion, and woolly hair. He was clad in black from head to foot, with a white tie, which contrasted strangely with his fiery skin, his pimply nose, thick lips, and athletic figure. His whole appearance was singular. He looked like a porter disguised as a bailiff. As soon as he saw Pruneaux, who was trying to put on an expression of the highest respectability, he exclaimed in a loud tone: "What! were you there, sir? That good-for-nothing Mariette didn't tell me! She always behaves in that way! I was busy, it's true, but I gave her orders to let me know when any one came. In this tumble-down place the doors open without being touched," he added, examining the lock which had yielded to the shock of the chair against the partition.

"I did not hear anything," muttered Pruneaux.

"Oh! I don't care if you did. A young swell was mad because I wouldn't let him pay before date—fifteen days before. I should like to see myself doing that! And all because he won some money yesterday at baccarat or the races. In a week's time he will be in another mess, and be coming back after more money. Oh, these Parisians! they are all fond of bounce! But come in, sir."

Pruneaux hesitated. This way of talking to a stranger about the affairs of the previous customer was not calculated to encourage him to tell his own business, especially such business as it was. He made up his mind, however, to do so, and seated himself in the chair which M. Guénégaud politely pointed out.

The chair was damaged, and the desk in a very bad state. A leaden inkstand, some split pens, a beer-glass, a lot of ruled paper, and a coloured pipe were spread about across the black leather cover, which was slashed and ripped all over with a pen-knife, and these incongruous accessories

seemed to have been placed there expressly to edify visitors as to the dissipated discounter's mode of life.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, striking an attitude, throwing himself back in his arm-chair, and playing with his watch-chain, which was of gilt copper, and as thick as a rope.

"I was told about you, sir," said Pruneaux, who was beginning to remember Frédoc's lesson, "by a gentleman I know—Monsieur Jules de Rangouze. He said that you undertook negotiations which are somewhat outside of usual commercial habits."

"That is true. Commercial habits are somewhat too regular. I am an innovator. I don't recognise the law which has set the rate at which a man may oblige his neighbour, and I venture to say that any intelligent man will say as I do. Money is of more or less value, accordingly as it is more or less needed; and a loan depends upon the offered guarantee."

"I agree with you as to that," interrupted Pruneaux, who had not come to listen to a speech on political economy, "and that is what leads me to propose to you——"

"Very happy that you agree with me, my dear sir," interrupted Guénégaud, in his turn. "It was Monsieur Jules de Rangouze who sent you to me, then? That is a first-rate recommendation, sir, first-rate!"

"Excuse me, sir, he spoke of you in my presence, by chance, but I did not tell him that I wished to see you. You will easily understand that a person does not care to divulge his money matters, if he be embarrassed, to a gentleman whom he meets frequently in society. I have precautions to take, many precautions."

"When a man has an honourable position—and it seems to me that you must have a first-class one—that is quite natural. But don't be squeamish with your humble servant. This office is the tomb of secrets, Tell me, if you please, who you are, and how much you require."

"I am Maître Pruneaux, a notary in Paris," said Antonia's lover, with an effort.

"I congratulate you, sir. Your name is well known, and a notary's charge is as good as bullion itself. What sum do you need?"

"A large sum, and before naming it to you, I should like to know how much you would lend, at the most."

"Good! I see. This place does not look like Rothschild's, and you probably wonder whether anything serious in the way of business is done here. Don't be alarmed. The safe isn't here, but there is plenty of money in it. I represent a capitalist who would not let his ears be cut off for two or three little millions. So, now, tell me your needs."

"Six hundred thousand francs."

"That is a large sum, but it can be raised if there is sufficient security and proper interest."

"I know to whom I have come, and I expect to pay accordingly."

"Will you pay thirty per cent.?"

"That was the interest mentioned by Monsieur de Rangouze. However——"

"You can bargain when we come to that. Let us hear what are the securities."

"I begin by stating, then, that I have only my name to offer."

"I must know what that amounts to. I believe that you could not give me notes endorsed by the president of the chamber of notaries. But you must have a good practice. That is easy to see."

"I paid three hundred and fifty thousand francs for my charge, and I expect a million to be left to me by an aged relative."

"That looks well, now! If our inquiries have satisfactory answers, it will suffice. Questions will be asked, of course."

"Oh, of course!"

"My partner, my dear sir, is a man who looks upon things from a high point of view. He judges from a moral point, if I may so express myself. He won't say: 'Why does this notary require six hundred thousand francs? He must have exhausted his means.' No, he will say that a notary may be inconvenienced just as well as any one else, if he is fond of a gay life. My partner sees life as it is. To him the question will be, whether the said notary's character is good, and if he can be relied upon. Will he sell his last shirt, or will he bolt? That is the whole question. We shall see. We say, then, six hundred thousand at thirty per cent., for how long?"

"For one year."

"That is a long time, but it can be done. You wish the money as soon as possible?"

"Monday, at the latest."

"Very well! Call on Saturday. All inquiries will have been made by that time. I shall answer yes or no. And if it be yes, we shall settle the matter there and then. Leave me your address in case I need to write to you."

Pruneaux produced his card, and gave it, not without some hesitation, to Guénégaud, who placed it in a greasy portfolio, and then drew a huge silver-gilt watch from his waistcoat pocket.

"Twenty minutes to two," he exclaimed, "and I am expected at two at the Café du Commerce. Excuse me, my dear sir, for leaving you. I am going to play billiards and take my revenge. You are stunned, ain't you, now, to think that a man who has just settled a six-hundred-thousand loan should go to jostle a lot of balls in his leisure moments? But you will be much more astonished when you see the bank-notes on Saturday."

The notary did not reply, and allowed himself to be shown out. He was amazed by all that he had seen and heard. He wondered whether the man was laughing at him, or whether the habits of money-lenders had changed as well as their manners. He only knew of them by hearsay, never having had recourse to them before, and this one might be in earnest in spite of his strange way of acting, for he had undoubtedly lent money to Guy de Bautru. And as people usually believe what they wish to believe, Pruneaux had not gone down ten steps of the staircase before he began to hope.

The staircase was badly lighted by a casement window looking out upon a narrow yard, and a sun ray was falling full in the face of a gentleman who was just coming up. Pruneaux, whose back was to the light, recognised him perfectly, and hung his head as he passed by.

The gentleman whose notice he had just escaped was no other than M. Aubijoux, and this meeting threw him into a state of the greatest perplexity. "Aubijoux here!" muttered he, as he stole along by the damp wall. "What is he here for? To see this money-lender? That's impossible. Aubijoux doesn't need his services. Still, it was he, I'm sure of that. Fortunately, he didn't see me. But I saw him perfectly well. Frédoc told me that he was not in Paris at present. I can't understand all this. Perhaps—it may be—yes, perhaps he is Guénégaud's partner."

The supposition was a strange one, but it took such hold upon the lawyer's mind that he began rapidly to examine all the results of the strange meeting which had just occurred. "He was quite rude to me the other night at his hall when I spoke of a loan to him," he thought. "Who knows whether it wasn't to compel me to go to his 'man of straw,' who lends at thirty per cent.? Money doesn't bring in as much in honest business, and, thanks to this plan, Aubijoux might double his capital in three years without compromising himself. It remains to be seen whether he will lend the coin. There is no difficulty about that, it seems to me. He doesn't know what a plight I am in, and, besides, I have a hold on him now, for to injure him I need only say that he is a usurer with a false partner. If I wrote two words to him as to meeting him in a doubtful-looking place in the Quartier Saint-Martin, he wouldn't dare refuse me. I really think that I shall have the money on Saturday, and, meantime, I may as well buy the two Japanese vases which Antonia wants."

This soliloquy brought him to his cab, into which he hastily climbed. It seemed to him as though inquisitive eyes peered out upon him from every window of the ugly house. He was ashamed of having gone there; but he felt no remorse for anything else. And yet this man had once been honest. The Grasshopper had certainly turned his head. There could be no doubt of it.

While the bewitched notary was telling his Jehu to drive him to see his Circe, who lived in the Avenue de Messine, M. Aubijoux was climbing to the second floor of the dirty house. M. Pruneaux had not been mistaken, for it was indeed the millionaire of the Boulevard Montmartre who had gone up the stairs. But he undoubtedly wished to pass unrecognised, for he did not wear the black frockcoat, grey trousers, or white waistcoat which he invariably sported when he did not care who saw him. On the contrary, he had donned a check-patterned jacket and a soft hat, which made him look like a commercial traveller.

When he reached the landing he stopped in front of the brass plate and muttered: "This must be the place. I must be skilful in my manoeuvres," and he gave a hard pull at the bell.

This time Guénégaud opened the door, with a pipe in his mouth and a sulky look on his face. "Very sorry, sir," grumbled he, "but time's up, and the hour for consultation is past." He did not even look at his visitor as he spoke.

"What, Marius, is this the way you receive an old comrade?" exclaimed M. Aubijoux.

"It is true that Marius is my first name, but may lightning strike me if I know you from Adam!"

"I must have grown very old since we used to amuse ourselves at Estac in Granny Ratonneau's wine-shop, where she sold such good tipple."

"It was good, I have never drank any equal to it, but that doesn't tell me who you are."

"Think a bit, Marius. Doesn't my mug remind you of anybody? The top-knot is grey and the skin is darker, but the nose is in exactly the same place."

"That may be, but it is a nose I never saw before."

"Then you never set foot on a copper-lined three-master, which went to Senegal and brought back loads of 'earth-nuts' to your employer old Vernègue."

"Yes, I did set foot on it, and more than once, but——"

"I told you so, and now you are coming to the truth. You are beginning to remember that you were at the head of a squad of porters on the wharf at Marseilles, and that you sometimes condescended to lend a hand yourself. It was hard work, wasn't it, lifting those bags, and it was a long way from the end of the Quai de Rive Neuve to old Vernègue's store. Still you could do the same now, for you haven't fallen off since you became a Parisian."

"Five hundred thousand devils spike me, if I——"

"Don't swear! I'll help you out of it. The three-master was called the 'Cazamance.' The mate of the 'Cazamance' was named Jean Tiboulen, a high-liver, if you please, who didn't despise ruin, and paid for more than one bottle which you drank. Don't you think that I look something like him?"

"No—yes—there's something—but Tiboulen was not as big as you are."

"He may have got broader in the shoulders in the meantime, for you haven't seen him for ten years."

"Then you are——"

"Tiboulen himself, my old Marius! Will you leave me here, outside, now that I have told you my name?"

"No, by heaven!" exclaimed Guénégaud, throwing the door wide open. "Come into the steward's room—that is to say, come in, as it's you. But I should never have recognised you, especially as I was told that Tiboulen died of yellow fever in Mexico."

"I caught it, but I got over it, and here I am! Ah, how much trouble I had to find you, but now that I have you, I shan't let you go. I shall take you to the café and pay for punch—good punch—such as we used to drink at Granny Ratonneau's shop. But let me see your establishment. You are not lodged like a ship-owner, but this is better than your garret in the Rue de la Darse, where you used to sleep on some old sacks. Aha! so you are a scribbler now-a-days? You have an office with a doorplate upon it: 'Business Agency.'"

"Yes, it bores me, but I must earn my living somehow."

"And you do earn it, it appears. But what makes you look at me as though I were a wild beast? You are not yet sure if I am Jean Tiboulen or not? Then I must be a wizard, for I will tell you all that you did when you were with him in '70, his last voyage to Marseilles."

"No; I believe you are he. Your face and your voice have changed, but it is you, and you are he."

"Shall I tell you what old Vernègue's store was like? Shall I describe his two clerks? There was the tall, dark one, and the other who had such a sly look."

"Not worth while, old fellow! Now that I look at you in the light, I wonder why I didn't know you from your eyes and teeth."

"They are still good, and the teeth chew as well as ever. You shall judge for yourself when you dine with me, one of these days. I will invite you, Marius, and not to some cheap hole either. You shall choose the restaurant."

"We will go to La Rapée, then, uncork some good Burgundy and eat a fish dinner that will be as good as a Marseilles stew. Your affairs go smoothly, it would seem? You're not a sailor any more, are you?"

"No. I'll tell you all about that, but not in this place. It's too warm, and I am thirsty as the devil. Where do you generally take your meals?"

"Near by. On the Quai de Valmy, beside the canal. The house isn't so fine as those on the Canebière, but the customers are very select, and there is a garden where we can talk. I had an appointment there to play billiards with some sergeants who belong to the military hospital, but I'll let that go. A fellow doesn't find a friend like you every day. It will remind me of old times. Didn't we have lots of fun?"

"We can have just as much now, Marius. Take your hat and let's set sail. I am dying of thirst."

"So am I. Go ahead, Tiboulen! I gave Mariette a holiday. I am going to shut up the shop."

"Who's Mariette—your wife?"

"Haven't any wife, not I! Mariette is my housekeeper. How about you?"

"I'm a bachelor, my lad, and I always shall be."

"Good; then we can drink just as much as we like."

M. Aubijoux went lightly down the stairs, and when they were in the street he took Guénégaud's arm. "Yes, old fellow," said he, "I have been looking for you for four days past. I arrived in Paris on Friday. I was told that you were living here—a man from Marseilles whom I met at Guadaloupe told me, but he did not know your address, or what you were doing. I asked some trades' people, but they knew nothing about you. Then I looked in the directory and I found: 'Guénégaud, business agent.' I said to myself: 'That must be my Marius. He was ambitious. He has changed his trade.' I was on the track and had the scent."

"Like a pointer! Do you intend to stay here long?"

"Always. I have put by a little pile of coin while I have been running round, and I have enough of pitching and tossing. I took an interest in a 'Navigation Company,' and I have been made a manager of it. That's my story, my dear fellow! Now, if you're not satisfied with your position I might get you a good place with us."

"I don't refuse, for I am satisfied and I'm not."

"What do you earn here?"

"Three hundred francs a month, that's all. To carry on such a paltry trade as this it's not enough."

"But you don't have to be here all day, do you?"

"No, only a couple of hours."

"It is not very hard, then?"

"Yes, but there's the responsibility."

"You are a cashier, then."

"No, indeed! But I represent my employer."

"You represent him in commercial matters, I presume?"

"There is nothing of the kind going on here. It surprises you? Well, I can speak out to a friend. My employer is a man who prefers to lend his money out at thirty or forty per cent instead of investing it in bonds. And as he pretends to be a perfect gentleman, he does not show himself to his customers. I receive them, ask their names, what security they offer, and take down the conditions of the loan. Then I put them off a week, and I make my report to my employer. He makes inquiries, and if the thing suits him he gives me the money. I hand it to the fool who borrows it, in exchange for a note to my order, which I indorse in blank and which is placed in my employer's safe till the day it falls due."

"And then you operate the other way. You give back the note, and you receive the money. The lender is never seen. You are right, Marius,

it is a poor trade. There is a law against usury, and you might go to prison for months."

"No danger! My employer is as sharp as a file. He picks out the people with whom he deals, and nine times out of ten it is he who sends them to me. They are all young men of good family. He finds out that some swell of his acquaintance is in a serape. He says to him, 'My dear fellow, if you need any money, I know of a usurer who can lend you some.' The other thanks him and comes here to be fleeced. The funniest part of it all is that he often sends people here whose cash he has won at cards. He wins their money, lends them money at an enormous interest, and has a right to their gratitude besides!"

"These Parisians are a rum lot!" exclaimed Aubijoux. "But what does it matter! I should prefer to see you represent my company at some big port. You shall have six thousand francs salary and run no risks."

"Tiboulen, my old fellow! if you got me that I should be yours till death, and you might count on me under all circumstances. I should be your slave."

"I don't ask so much, but I promise to see about it for you. Is this your café?"

"Yes; it's a good one, too, and stylish for the neighbourhood of the Canal Saint-Martin. We shall sit under this arbour. I prefer to drink out of doors. May I have the punch made as I like it?"

"How's that? Of course you can!"

"I want to make it myself. Waiter, bring a punch-bowl, a bottle of rum, some sugar, two lemons, and three fresh eggs," cried Guénégaud, rapping with his cane upon one of the tables in the little garden facing the Café du Commerce. "Tiboulen, my boy," he added, "you shall taste my egg-nog and you will enjoy it, I'm sure! I put that tall fellow Vallouris under the table once with this mixture; you remember him, old Vernègue's under-clerk."

"Ah, yes," said Jean Tiboulen *alias* Aubijoux, "that tall fellow Vallouris. I remember now, I remember him very well, but I had forgotten his name. What became of him?"

"I think that he must be dead," said Guénégaud, indifferently.

"Really! That's a pity! He promised to turn out well. Why the deuce do you think he's dead? He was very young."

"No one knows whether he's dead or not."

"He did not die at Marseilles, then?"

"No; it seems he got killed when he was in the Garde Mobile, in Paris or somewhere."

"During the war of '70, then? That was the year I left Marseilles."

"Yes. He had no liking for business. He wanted to fight, so he enlisted, and he made an end of himself. In one way he did well."

"How was that?"

"He'd have had a bad job on his shoulders if he had lived."

"How's that? You surprise me. Tell me all about it."

"By-and-by, old chap. I must make the punch first. Here comes the waiter with what we want. What have you got in that tea-pot, my lad?"

"Hot water, sir," stammered the waiter.

"Didn't you tell your master that the punch was for me? Well, look, this is what I do with your hot water," added Guénégaud, pouring the contents of the tea-kettle upon the grass, "it is excellent to make pinks grow."

The lad disappeared after placing the punch-bowl, rum, glasses, spoons, lemons and eggs, as asked for, upon the table. Tiboulen lighted a cigar and handed another to Marius, who took off his coat so as to make the punch more at his ease.

"Smoke that. I bought these at Havana."

"You have been to America, then?" said Marius.

"Yes, and I never intend to go back."

"I understand; you prefer to enjoy yourself here, to tiring yourself out on the 'Cazamance.' The old shell must be played out by this time."

"Yes, it stopped sailing in '75, at Saint-Louis in Senegal."

"Well, it lasted longer than Daddy Vernègue."

"Ah, he's dead too, then?"

"A year after the war, and it was none too soon, for the poor old man had his troubles."

"What troubles had he? He was doing very well when I left Marseilles."

"That doesn't prevent his having failed," said Marius, pouring the rum into the punch-bowl.

"Indeed!"

"Yes. He was robbed, I must tell you."

"Who robbed him? A partner or a customer?"

"Neither. He had placed thirty-three thousand francs, with which he meant to pay a bill due next day, in a drawer, which some one opened. The money was stolen, and old Vernègue couldn't pay his bill, and from that day forth everything went wrong with him. He died of grief."

"Poor fellow! He was a worthy man."

"Not bad, but very close. He would never give me more than five francs a day for directing his wharfmen, and his two clerks were all but starved."

"What became of the other one, the fair-haired fellow?"

"Rascaillon?"

"Yes, the one who went about and recovered bad debts."

"I don't know," answered Marius, curtly. "But look, here's your mixture! I have only to stir it and set fire to it. Give me a match."

"There's one. But how is it that you never heard anything about Rascaillon? The same man from Marseilles who told me about you when I arrived at Guadaloupe, told me that Rascaillon had gone to Algiers."

"I think he did, but I never went to look after him."

"When did you leave Marseilles?"

"Four years ago, to come here, and I had all sorts of trouble for nine months."

"Until you came across your capitalist?"

"As you say. Without him I shouldn't have had enough to eat. Look how the punch fires up! See! look at it, Tiboulen!"

"Don't let it burn too long. It won't be strong enough if you do."

"You are right. I shall put it out. Now give us your glass! I'll sit down. Your health, old chap!"

"Yours, Marius! Your sore-throat mixture is first-rate. I never had any as good, even in Granny Ratonneau's den. Do you know, now, it vexes me not to know where Rascaillon is?"

"Why?"

"Because one day, when I was acquainted with him in Marseilles and needed some coin, he lent me two hundred francs. We drank it up

together, that is true ; but I feel greatly obliged to him, and as I am rich at present, I should like to pay him back."

" Well, you may boast of being lucky ! He never lent me a penny. If I were in your place I shouldn't trouble myself about the blockhead."

" I do trouble my head about him. What do I care for two hundred francs ? Rascaillon may be in need, and now-a-days I no more care for that amount than for the old hulk of a 'Cazamance.' I shouldn't be surprised if Rascaillon were as poor as Job."

" He ! no, indeed ! He has got over that long ago."

" Then you have met him ?"

" No, but I mean what I say. Rascaillon was as lazy as a lizard, but he was sharp, skilful, and had no more principles than a toad has feathers. He must have got on. If I were told he were a millionaire I shouldn't be so much surprised."

" It's possible. I admit such strange things happen now-a-days. If he has made a fortune he must be in Paris, and if I saw him I should, all the same, like to show him that I pay my debts."

" Well, look him up in the Directory. You found my address there," said Guénégaud, in a mocking tone.

" You are right. Give me a glass of punch, old man !"

" Two, if you like ! When there is no more, some more will come," said the ex-wharfman, swallowing a full glass himself.

He drank as men do in taverns, crooking his elbow, throwing back his head, and half closing his eyes. M. Aubijoux took advantage of his gesticulations to throw the burning liquid which he had poured out for him upon the grass.

" Thunder and lightning ! it does one good as it trickles down," said Guénégaud, rubbing the pit of his stomach with his broad hand. " When I think that I sometimes have to go weeks without even a bottle of rum !"

" But it seems to me that with your salary——"

" My dear fellow, on the fifteenth of the month I never have a farthing in my pocket, and if I asked ten francs from my employer, the niggard would refuse them. Ah ! he doesn't tie up his dogs with strings of sausages. Everything for himself and nothing for anybody else."

" Like Rascaillon, then ?"

" Yes, like Rascaillon. Worse than Rascaillon ; Rascaillon was avaricious, but he didn't cause any trouble. The gentleman whom I serve goes into the highest society—he dresses like a prince, eats at the best restaurants, and lets me take my little bit at Duval's, wear worn-out boots, and smoke the worst tobacco. It's disgusting !"

" But you are very useful to him."

" I should say I was. I defy him to replace me. Where will he find another man of straw to take my place, and help him in his underhand business—I mean a man who doesn't steal and doesn't tell what he is ? Do you know that if I wanted to stop his proceedings I need only tell one of the idiots whom he sends to me, ' You need not take the trouble to come here. Go and find Mr. So-and-so, in such a street, at such a number. He is your friend, is he not ? Well, it is he who lends you money at thirty per cent.'"

" If you did so, old chap, I shouldn't blame you."

" Yes, but I can't do so. He gives me my grub and lodging."

" It depends upon you to drop him, as I propose to find another berth for you."

"Oh, when I have that my man will have a bad time of it. I know a great deal about him, and I'll settle him! Meantime I must put up with him, and he does not amount to as much as this bowl of punch we are drinking."

Guénégaud might have said "that I am drinking," for he had just taken his fifth glass, and M. Aubijoux, still managing as before, had not swallowed half a one. At this rate, the money-lender's clerk would soon reach perfect intoxication—that fuddled condition when a man reveals all his secrets. This was the result that the millionaire relied upon while pretending to help in emptying the bowl which had been filled to the brim with the fiery punch. He was in full possession of his clearness of thought, and the more Guénégaud drank, the more Tiboulen Aubijoux plied him with questions.

"Your employer is a perfect rascal," said he; "where the devil did you come across him?"

"I met him a long time ago."

"Then you didn't pick him up in the Paris streets?"

"Oh, no, you may be sure of that! In Paris he wouldn't have looked at me."

"Then it was at Marscilles?"

"I did not say so."

"Well, as you never lived anywhere but in Paris and Marseilles—"

"I beg your pardon, I have travelled a great deal."

"In Algeria, perhaps?"

"Yes, perhaps; but I say old chap, it annoys me to tell old stories. Even if they were gay ones I shouldn't care to tell them, but they are not. All that I regret is Granny Ratonneau and you, and now I don't regret you as I have found you again."

"Don't you regret Rascaillon?"

"Rascaillon is a scamp. I told you so before."

"No, you didn't."

"Ah! I thought I did. When will you have me made an agent of your Navigation Company?"

"Very soon. What port would you like to represent? Marseilles, I suppose."

"No, indeed! I don't wish to see the Canebière again."

"I understand! It brings up unpleasant recollections. You got acquainted with Rascaillon there, and it appears he is a scamp. Still, that is no reason why I should remain in his debt, and I should be glad to know where he lives."

"What a queer idea," grumbled Guénégaud, swallowing a sixth glass of punch. "I don't run after my creditors in that way. However, everybody has his own way of doing things. Tell me, Tiboulen," said he, after a pause, "what would you give to pay your debt to Rascaillon?"

"I owe him two hundred francs. I would give two hundred more."

"Well, then, give me twenty louis, and I will give ten to Rascaillon."

M. Aubijoux started. He saw that he had nearly attained his purpose. "Come now, my dear Guénégaud," said he, laughing, "you won't undertake to tell me again that you don't know where he is; he must be in Paris."

"Yes, and I have just remembered that one of my friends told me his address. You need not go to him, as you don't wish to do more than pay him, and I will do that for you."

"I prefer to pay him myself."

"Do you imagine that I want to swindle you out of your two hundred francs? Thousands pass through my hands every day, and I have never kept one. I am poor and needy, but I'm honest."

"I know that, old chap! If you were not, your employer would have kicked you out. But I have particular reasons for talking with Rascaillon. Here are ten louis, tell me where I can find him."

Guénégaud eyed the gold pieces spread upon the table with greedy covetousness. He was, no doubt, calculating how many bottles of rum they would buy.

"Well," he said, with an effort, "I believe that he lives in the Rue de Madrid."

"You are not sure, then?"

"Yes, it's there. I don't remember the number, but it is at the end of the street—near the Boulevard Malesherbes. But it appears that Rascaillon is Rascaillon no longer. He has changed his name."

"Oho! he has, has he?" muttered the false Tiboulen, "I thought as much."

"Give me the two hundred francs," said Guénégaud, stretching out his hand to take them from the table.

"Presently. When you tell me what Rascaillon calls himself now."

"You want to know, do you?"

"I should say that I did! I presume that if I went to ask for Monsieur Rascaillon, the door-keeper would laugh in my face."

"You might wait outside, and when Rascaillon came out you would know him at once, although he is much better dressed than he used to be. You could go up to him, hand him his coin, and the matter would be over."

"No, no, not in the street, we couldn't talk at all!"

"I don't—remember his new name—very well."

"Think a little. It will come back to you."

The drunkard's eyes were fixed upon the gold coins, and, to prevent him from attempting to pocket them, M. Aubijoux spread his hand over them, and said, looking at him fixedly: "Why do you make so much trouble over the matter, old chap? Are you afraid that I shall play some trick on Vernègue's old clerk? Just remember that I have no spite against him whatever. He never did me any harm; on the contrary, he did me a good turn."

"No, it isn't that which bothers me."

"Or are you afraid that he will be angry at my handing back the two hundred francs which I have owed him for ten years. It isn't probable, from what I know of his character, You told me yourself that he used to be avaricious. That's a defect that does not disappear as people grow older. Rascaillon will be delighted to have his money back, and he will thank me, I'll be bound."

"Well, if I tell you his new name you will give me the two hundred francs?"

"You need only put out your hand to take them."

"You must be very rich," said the drunkard, with an air of mistrust.

"Come, now, I'm getting tired of all this! Whoever saw anybody act that way before? Here I give myself no end of trouble to find you out, and go all over Paris, only to do you a good turn, fer I thought that I shouldn't find you in any very flourishing condition, and I fancied that the help of an old comrade might be useful to you. I succeed in finding you,

you tell me your business, I see that you need a lift, and I offer my services, and am ready to prove what I say. We come here like friends. In the course of our conversation, I find a reason for paying you a little sum for services rendered; I only ask for a little information, and you bargain with me about it! You button yourself up to the throat! You ask me questions to know why I want a mere address! One would really think that it was a State secret. Upon my word, my dear fellow, since you speak like that, let us say no more on the matter. Call the waiter, so that I may pay for what we have had, and stay here, if you like. I'm going. When you change your mind, you can call upon me at my house. But I don't answer for the situation I offered you being kept open long."

"You are right, by a thousand thunders!" exclaimed Guénégaud, striking the table with his fist; "I'm a fool. What is all this to me, after all? What do I care whether Rascaillon likes to see you or not? He hasn't been so very kind to me, the scamp! I should be very stupid to trouble my head about him."

"Well, then, tell me the name he has taken. It won't scorch your lips."

"Promise me that you won't tell Rascaillon how you knew his address and his new name."

"I promise. What does he call himself now?"

"He calls himself Monsieur de Rangouze."

"Rangouze!" exclaimed M. Aubijoux.

"Yes, Jules de Rangouze. He put in the *de*. While he was about it, it was just as well, and it must be admitted that Rangouze sounds better than Rascaillon. It's prettier. If he had remained a mere Monsieur Rascaillon, he would not have come to anything. Suppose a 'Monsieur Rascaillon' were announced at a reception?"

"Yes, I understand his having changed his name, especially since he goes into society."

"Oh, into society of the tip-top sort. He plays baccarat, too, and bets at the races. Now, Tiboulen, you must give me my shiners."

"Here they are," said Aubijoux, pushing them towards the drunkard, who dexterously slipped them into his waistcoat pocket. "You deserve to have them."

"And you will get me the situation in the Navigation Company?"

"That's understood."

"Good! then I shall be able to get along without that beggarly scamp?"

"Who are you talking about—Rascaillon?"

"No; my scoundrel of an employer. I shall soon give him the slip."

"You had better do so; but tell me, this Rascaillon must be very rich, eh?"

"He has a large fortune, and it is getting larger every day."

"That's strange; at Marseilles he hadn't a penny of his own, and was up to his ears in debt. How did he manage to become a millionaire in so short a time? It isn't ten years since he was running about the streets for old Vernègue."

"You can ask him how it was when you see him."

"I should like it better if you told me, for I am afraid that he would tell me to go about my business."

"That's very probable. He is not talkative, and he has his reasons for that."

"Yes, he may not like to be reminded of the time when he was so

poor. All people who grow rich are like that. And now that I think of it, he has not perhaps made his fortune so fast without transgressing the laws."

"Oh, that never troubled him. He never cared in the least about the law, not he!"

"The deuce! If he is a scamp, then, I don't care to renew my acquaintance with him."

"You are right," said Guénégaud, at once, "and you ought to follow the advice I gave you at first, and give me the two hundred francs to hand to him. I will give them to him, and, so that you may be sure of it, I will make him sign a receipt for them."

"No. He would ask how I came to meet you, and where I live, and so on, and I don't care to have him visit me. I will send the coin to him by post in a registered letter, in which I will tell him that a friend pays an old debt. In that way my conscience will be free, and I shan't have the annoyance of feeling that I owe money to a man whom I can no longer esteem."

"Your idea is a famous one. Send him his money and let him go. If you associated with him, he would try to cheat you."

"Then he's a swindler, decidedly?"

"That depends upon how the thing is looked upon. There are people who think that usury is all right."

"Usury? Oh, I begin to understand. Come now, old chap, tell me everything. You won't be saying any more than I can guess. You are Rascaillon's clerk, are you not?"

"Well, then, I am. I didn't wish to tell you so, but I have let the cat out of the bag. That will teach him not to be so mean to an old comrade."

"Besides, you don't need him now, as I shall take care of your future. I now understand why he chose you. He knew you long ago."

"And he knew that I shouldn't deceive him, or denounce him. But I don't owe him any gratitude. He didn't take me with him to oblige me. He needed me, and feared me. One night as I was going out of a cook shop, where I had dined on a pennyworth of bread and a cup of coffee with milk, I found myself face to face with Rascaillon, who was wrapped in a furred overcoat, and had a big cigar in his mouth. He tried to avoid me, but I took him by the collar of his bearskin coat, and forced him to listen to me. After that he simmered down, and told me that he was doing business, and might perhaps employ me. I spare you our conversation—but a week afterwards I was installed in the Rue des Vinaigriers, in the den where you found me, and I began my trade as a usurer's assistant. This has been going on for three years, and I can assure you that I have helped to fleece many a fool. Only to-day, there have been two there. A young swell named Bautru, who borrowed thirty thousand francs for thirty-three thousand at one month, and wanted to pay before date, and a notary who came to be cheated, the fool!"

"A notary?"

"Yes, my dear fellow, a notary. He is a fellow named Prunavaux who wants a mere trifle,—six hundred thousand francs for a year. I don't advise you to trust that fellow with any money of yours."

"Prunavaux!" muttered M. Aubijoux.

"Do you know him?"

"Not I!"

"I ask you that because if you do I beg of you not to say anything.

I should leave Rascaillon willingly, but I have no right to run down his business, as I am in it myself."

"Don't be afraid. I have no dealings whatever with notaries. But I can't get over Rascaillon's handling hundreds of thousands! How did he get hold of so much money?"

"Oh! he was not so well off when he began this game. I don't think that he had more than thirty or forty thousand francs at the time, but they have greatly increased. A capital at forty per cent. soon grows, especially when there are no losses, and Monsieur de Rangouze knows how to work properly. He only sends me people of means, members of the club where he plays the swell himself. Now he is rolling in gold, and if this goes on—"

"He will become a millionaire. I don't doubt it. But his beginning is what I can't get over. Had he made all that money when he left Marseilles?"

"Not that I know of. But he didn't need to run after a few coppers, as when you knew him. He hadn't changed his way of living, but it was said that he had money somewhere, hidden away. It was just about the time when Daddy Vernègue failed. Rascaillon went up as his master went down, and when Vernègue was dead he made off for Algiers."

"Does any one know what he did there?"

"All sorts of things—perhaps what he is doing here. But no one knows what he really did, and no one remembers him in Marseilles. Monsieur de Rangouze is a big man, and he would laugh at any audacious chap who felt minded to recognise him as the former clerk of a Marseilles merchant."

"Bah! if you choose to show him up—"

"I can't. I have worked for him. I don't wish to speak out. No one but you can denounce him, and you promised me not to do so."

"Suppose that Vallouris should turn up? Are you sure that he is dead?"

"Not perfectly sure, no. Nothing has ever been heard of him, and he was probably killed in fighting. But if he still lives he won't show himself in France. He is accused of theft."

"That bad business that you were talking of just now?"

"Yes. It was he who took the thirty-three thousand francs from Daddy Vernègue's drawer."

"He or Rascaillon."

"Rascaillon!" exclaimed Guénégaud, "he was never suspected of doing it."

"That is because suspicion fell upon another man; but if Rascaillon got the money, that would explain his being so differently situated in so short a time."

"The devil! So it would! I remember that he began to spend more money at the café a little while after the robbery, and before that he was never seen to spend a crown. A thousand thunders! I don't care whether I work for a money-lender or not, but if I knew that I had been eating a thief's bread for three years, I—come, Tiboulen, I don't like to talk or think of it, I would rather drink another bottle of rum."

Guénégaud took up his cane to summon the waiter by striking upon the table, but M. Aubijoux rose and said abruptly: "No. You have drunk enough, and I have business to attend to. Before we separate, listen to me."

"You speak very harshly," muttered the drunkard, struck by the sudden change in the tone and manner of Tiboulen Aubijoux.

"Rascaillon musn't know that I have seen you," rejoined the millionaire. "If you speak of our meeting, you will end your days in poverty, and it will be your own fault, let me tell you. But if you say nothing, in a week from now I will bring you word about the situation I promised you, and a note for a thousand francs to begin with. Do you understand?"

"I shall be mute as a fish, but—"

"Not a word more. Your future depends upon yourself. I will see you again." And without noticing Guénégaud's astonishment, M. Aubijoux left the garden muttering to himself: "Well, I haven't lost the time I spent in Marseilles, nor lost any here. In three days the thief will be caught. May I be whipped if I thought it was that fellow Rangouze. He has money in my business, too, but I don't care what the scoundrel may do. I shall go to Estelan, who is impatiently waiting for me, and tell him that he can show himself again and take his wife back, in spite of his fool of a father-in-law."

IX.

THE summer rains which make the corn grow delight the hearts of theatrical lessees. They pray for it when it is delayed, and bless it when it falls. They open and shut their doors according as the sky is clear or clouded. Of all the saints in the calendar, St. Medard* is certainly the one to whom they most frequently offer their prayers. Now, St. Medard had been beneficent that year, and M. Escandecat, an ex-bass singer, had decided after long hesitation that he would start as a manager at midsummer, with a new operetta and a company he had got together, in a theatre which was duly repaired and provided with the very attractive name of the *Fantaisies Comiques*.

The impresario had met with misfortunes as a singer in the now distant days of his youth. He could boast of having been hissed on every stage in France. A Bordelese accent, which he had never been able to get rid of, had greatly contributed to his failure, and after many rebuffs he had decided never more to invoke the phantoms in the fourth act of "*Robert the Devil*." However, not wishing to give up his connection with the theatrical profession, he had become a manager, and for ten years past he had been roaming about France with a company which did not enrich him, although he did not spend much money upon it.

The farce had finally ended at Marmande, where all the trunks of the company had been kept for unpaid hotel bills; and poor Escandecat remaining without a company and without money, had gone in a melancholy mood to Paris, that providential city where poor actors in despair may rely upon the unforeseen and still indulge in hope.

Fortune at last smiled upon him. One day, while he was standing wrapped in his ulster, outside the *Café des Variétés*, she came to him in the guise of a pretty woman, who was leaving the *Passage des Panoramas*, where she had just been buying a fan.

Escandecat recognised Antonia, a member of his former company, and Antonia, who was not proud, chose to remember that in 1875 she had travelled about under his management. And, as she liked to show her new splendour to the friends of her days of poverty, she invited him to

* The French St. Swithin.—TRANS.

dine with her at her handsome apartment in the Avenue de Messine. It was at dessert that the great affair of the Fantaisies Comiques was broached. To become a manager in Paris—Escandecat's dream—was what Antonia could realise, while realising a dream of her own, that of singing before the Parisian public as near as possible to the Boulevard des Italiens.

Escandecat, who was greatly pleased, took it upon himself to find a theatre in three months' time, an operetta and a troupe, and Antonia guaranteed to furnish the necessary funds. She had a "backer" ready who only asked to pay, and who did pay. Escandecat promised secrecy, and a credit was opened which exceeded his highest hopes. He did not know himself for the same man, for he actually had a cheque-book. Every time that he signed a cheque he looked at himself in the glass as if to make sure that it was really he who was drawing money out of an actual bank.

He was discreet, and showed surprising activity. No one knew where this tide of wealth arose from. Some folks imagined that the money was Antonia's, and predicted that she would soon see the end of it, for in their opinion she would utterly fail in her attempt. She indulged, they said, in a very vain hope when she imagined that her *début* would lead to an engagement at the Opéra Comique. Nor would she, they added, succeed in humiliating her former companions in the profession.

However, there was a theatre in the neighbourhood of the grand opera-house, a theatre which was lying idle, and where failures were as common as nettles at the foot of old walls. The thing to be done was to rent and restore it, and this swallowed up the trifle of a hundred thousand francs. The operetta was not so expensive. Two composers and three libretto writers set to work, and wrote and composed it in forty-seven days. The journalist Métel lent his help. As for the company, it came from the four points of the compass. Escandecat introduced a comic singer who had been pining away in the inns of Castelnaudary; he paid the hotel bill of a tenor from Puy-en-Velay; and he sent for several of the players who had already shared the privations of his provincial campaigns. Paris furnished the lady singers. Antonia was not at all desirous that they should display any talent. "I shall be a host in myself," she said. And thus it came to pass that one night in June, a few days after the Grand Prix de Paris had been lost and won, the newspapers and posters about town announced that the Fantaisies Comiques was about to open, and that Mademoiselle Antonia would make her appearance in the new three-act operetta of "Zairette, Queen of Cathay."

As it had rained on St. Medard's day, Escandecat relied upon forty days of showers, which would infallibly keep the Parisian fashionables from Trouville and Vichy, not to speak of the foreigners who had come over to see the races. If June 8th had been a fine day, the manager, who was very weather-wise, would have put off "Zairette" until October, and Prunciaux's illusions would have lasted three months more. See what a notary's fate may depend upon!

That night, shortly before eight o'clock, the front of the theatre where the Grasshopper was about to sing—perhaps not even "all summer," like the insect of the fable—was ablaze with light. Festoons of gas jets illuminated the cornices, and above the door the name of the new piece could be read in letters of fire. The public, or rather that portion of it which does not scorn to wait for a place in the pit, had already entered, and fashionable spectators were beginning to arrive. Broughams and

victorias drove up at a brisk trot through the crowd of ticket-sellers, and from them alighted gentlemen in evening dress, and ladies covered with flowers and diamonds, and flashing like meteors. Never had the peaceful street in which the theatre stood seen so showy a crowd. The people residing in the houses near by came to their windows and the doorkeepers to the sidewalks. They were asking one another in honour of what president or prince the long-closed theatre had opened.

Clubmen knew very well that there was nothing of that kind going on. The news of Antonia's *début* had spread about with the rapidity of lightning, and all the Grasshopper's friends had engaged stalls or boxes. There was a legion of them, enough to have filled the theatre. But, like a wise woman, Antonia had exacted that the press should be supplied with seats, and that a number should even be reserved for amateurs who might wish to procure them at the box-office on the night of the first performance.

Among the latter were Souscarrière and his nephew, who had not come to judge of the Grasshopper's voice by any means. They knew that sharp falsetto too well already. They had other matters on hand, and did not repair to the theatre merely to show themselves. Bautru, who was seriously in love with Madeleine de Maugars, spent almost all his time at Vésinet now. He had even dispensed with going to the races on the day of the Grand Prix ; but his absence had not prevented his clearing a neat sum—thanks to some bold bets made far ahead. This success had set him afloat again, and he had immediately gone to Guénégaud for his note of hand. Marius had put him off for forty-eight hours, but when Guy returned to the Rue des Vinaigriers, he duly obtained the slip of stamped paper which he had signed. So everything was going well with himself, and but one black spot marred his uncle's horizon. Pruneaux's behaviour bewildered Souscarrière, who could not accustom himself to this invisible lawyer's course of action. Tired at never finding him, annoyed besides at what his nephew had overheard after Madame Ambijoux's ball, he had gone at last to his friend Frédoc, to ask his advice as well as to complain to him. Souscarrière had charge of withdrawing Maugars' funds, and had offered to do so, and now Pruneaux kept out of his way as though he wished to avoid hearing anything on the subject.

Frédoc, on being consulted, had not been less ready than before to vouch for the notary's honesty. He had admitted that Pruneaux's course justified any precautions against his light conduct, and had ended by urging Souscarrière to insist upon the reimbursement of the six hundred thousand francs due to the Count de Maugars. Pruneaux's present behaviour was highly discreditable, it could not be denied. Frédoc's confidential communications had gone no further, for he would have blushed to take advantage of the secrets told him by the ruined notary. Still he had said enough to awaken Souscarrière's mistrust, and this was all he had aimed at. Frédoc, like a gentleman, wished to remain neutral in all that concerned Antonia's imprudent admirer and the Count de Maugars' sympathetic friend ; he wished to warn the latter without denouncing the former. And thereupon Souscarrière, who did not like half-way measures, had sworn to follow Pruneaux everywhere, to accost him no matter where they met, and to extort some clear explanation from him.

He took leave of Frédoc, thanking him ; and went to Bautru, who was dining in Paris that night ; then, after briefly explaining to Guy what was going on, he induced him to accompany him to the Fantaisies Comiques.

Bautru did not care to go, and would greatly have preferred to pass the

evening at Vésinet, but he could not refuse to help his uncle in an undertaking which aimed at saving M. de Maugars' fortune. They accordingly went to the theatre, where they secured a couple of stalls, and they now stood looking at the house, and exchanging remarks.

"If any one had told me that I should be at the theatre to-night," muttered Bautru, "I should have been very much surprised. If Madame de Puygarrault learns that we were here she will make a scene about it to-morrow."

"I don't care a bit for the marchioness's scenes," replied Souscarrière, "and I will make Pruneaux give up that money as soon as possible. I don't care whether I go up to him in the theatre or elsewhere. Point him out to me if you see him before I do. I will keep him in sight, and after the first act I will corner him. I will get him against the wall, and if I see that he hesitates I will threaten to complain to the public prosecutor."

"You won't be driven to that. Pruneaux may be cramped a bit, but I don't believe he would use his clients' money. I fancy that Frédoc has exaggerated the matter, in his solicitude as to interests dear to us."

"I hope so, but we must act, and I shan't let Pruneaux go till he has promised to explain and pay up to-morrow."

"I hope he will make his appearance."

"He is hiding perhaps, but presently I will go and take a turn in the lobby to see who comes out of the boxes. There's a party of your friends seating themselves in front of us."

"Yes, I see Girac. He is a little less tipsy than usual."

"And there is the other man—the one that I dislike so much."

"Rangouze? I assure you, uncle, that he is a very obliging fellow."

"What do I care for that? I shall never ask any service of him. With their high collars and white shirt fronts, your young friends look to me like perfect geese. I must give them that dinner, however, as I supped with them that famous night at the Café Anglais. I invited them, and I don't wish that they should take me for some boasting Gascon."

"Oh, there's no hurry. Besides, you invited the ladies, and I don't care to meet those women again."

"Very well, then, I will entertain them without you. The marchioness can make no objection to that. But your faithful Busserolles is not on hand. How is it that he has missed this first performance."

"I'm sure I don't know. I saw him recently. There is a little coolness between us."

"Ah! I see him now, near the orchestra. He is persistently looking at one of the lower boxes. There's a woman in the case. I saw the tips of some gloved fingers making signs to him, and he is now making a reply. Who is he telegraphing to?"

"I'm sure I don't know. The lady is sitting back in her box, but she will end by showing herself, and then I shall perhaps be able to tell you her name, as you seemingly take an interest in Busserolles' love affairs."

"I! oh, no."

"Ah! it is Madame Aubijoux who is making signs to Busserolles. Sec, she is leaning forward in her box."

Souscarrière had never seen the eccentric lady of the château on the Boulevard de Montmorency. He had not been introduced to her at the ball. "That tall blonde with blue eyes, is that Madame Aubijoux?"

"Yes," replied Bautru.

"She does not please me at all. She is pretty, but she looks like a

German governess. Her style is languishing. She seems to have taken a fancy to Busserolles."

"Ah, there comes 'Leather helmet' as you call her."

"Leather helmet? Ah, yes! Rosine de Villemomble. My enemy at supper. It seems that she has not yet forgiven me for calling her an adventuress, or for remembering that I saw her in Africa, for she is making angry eyes at me. Who are the two young persons with her?"

"Two new arrivals: a Hungarian woman and an Italian one."

"I thought that she always went about with Antonia."

"They have had a quarrel, I hear."

"The theatre is full, but I don't see Pruneaux."

"Frédoc must have been mistaken if he told you that you would meet him here. He may be drawing up a contract at this very moment."

"Oh, no! I should say that he must be behind the scenes, and I will find him, even if I have to go there to look for him."

"Not now, my dear uncle. The overture is about to begin. Let us resign ourselves to listening to the music."

"If I could only stop up my ears?" grumbled Souscarrière.

The first notes of the overture interrupted his remarks. There was no originality about the music, which was made up of bits from all the fashionable operettas, slightly disguised, but most unskillfully, so that almost every air in the harlequinade was recognisable. But the public was not a fastidious one. They had come to hear the "Grasshopper," and cared little for the work of a couple of chance composers of poor music.

The people were inclined to be merry, and there was laughter in the boxes, talking in the gallery, and moving about in the pit. In the stalls, which were almost exclusively filled by clubmen, nobody listened, preferring to ogle the women instead.

Madame Aubijoux had shown herself for a moment in one of the stage boxes, but she had since disappeared from the eyes of all save some women opposite, who were trying to see her as she sat far back in her box. Busserolles also had disappeared, and as a stall had remained between Girac and Rangouze, it seemed as if after coming with them, he had left them to spend his evening in a more agreeable manner.

Métel was seated near the entrance of the orchestra, and although he had helped to write the words of the operetta, he by no means looked anxious, like an author whose destiny is about to be decided. He laughed openly at the musical platitudes of the overture, made signs to his friends, and Bautru, who saw him, took an opportunity of pointing him out to his uncle.

The curtain rose at this moment, and showed the interior of a harem—such as is seen on the stage. Escandecat had surpassed himself. He had bought the scenery of a theatre which had lately failed, and with the side scenes of "La Favorita" and a background from the "Reine de Chypre," he had made an "Oriental interior."

The subject of the new operetta was taken from an unfamiliar little story by Crebillon, the younger, and Métel had dished it up to suit the tastes of the present day. Zairette was, in Crebillon's tale, an actress, belonging to the opera, whom some barbarian pirates carried off and sold to a sultan, but Métel had turned her into a washerwoman, who, leaving her buckets behind her, had secured an engagement in a company of players bound for Samarcande. The said players being attacked on the way by some Tartars, were enslaved, and Fifine, the washerwoman, was taken

to the seraglio of the King of Cathay, who chose to call her Zairette. The situation was by no means novel, but the fun of the thing consisted in making Zairette talk like a washerwoman in reply to the flowery discourse of the sultan. The part suited Antonia in more ways than one, for she could have taught new slang to Madame Angot herself. However, she flattered herself that she had a voice, and Zairette sang upon all occasions.

The first air in this masterpiece was a chorus in which the bad manners of the French washerwoman, now the favourite of the seraglio, were deplored. It was listened to good-naturedly, but with little attention. Rosine and her friends sneered; Girac dozed off; and Rangouze made efforts to see some one who was hidden in a small stage box. Bautru closed his eyes and thought of Madeleine, and Souscarrière shrugged his shoulders. He was not Parisian enough to swallow stuff of this sort patiently.

The chorus was followed by the entrance of Sultan Moufhac, escorted by his entire court, in which there were several young women well known about town. This escort created a sensation, as there were numerous friends of these ladies in the theatre.

"I suspect that there will be some hissing later on," whispered Bautru, in his uncle's ear. "In any case the Grasshopper will certainly repent of this attempt to attract public attention. She is very far from being up to the mark."

"She deserves to be hissed," grumbled Souscarrière, "and if Prune-vaux doesn't make his appearance I shan't stay here to listen."

Escandecat played the Sultan. An artist's heart still beat in the manager's breast. He remembered that he had been well received in Lisbon and Lodera, and wished to show the Parisians that talent existed outside of the company of the grand opera house. He began the lines written by Méteil to a well-known strain :

"For this pretty washer-girl,
My heart and my brain they whirl."

Then came a pause, followed by these lines, sung archly :

"But she may be a deceiver,
And can I really believe her?"

"She certainly is a deceiver," said a thick voice, which Bautru recognised as having heard somewhere before. "Yes, old chap, she is," added the voice, as Bautru turned and saw Guénégaud.

"What! that fellow here?" muttered he.

"What ails you?" asked Souscarrière.

"Nothing. There's a money-lender here whom I borrowed some coin of, but I paid him back yesterday with the money I won at the Grand Prix."

"Good! I hope that you will have nothing more to do with such people. You cannot marry Madeleine de Maugars if you have any debts, and I hope that next year you will marry her."

"I wish that I could marry her to-morrow."

The sovereign of Cathay now ordered one of his seraglio to bring the young captive before him, and took occasion to launch out a very high note, on the effect of which he had placed immense reliance. The odalisque to whom he gave the order was Zélie, whom the Grasshopper, faithful in her friendship, had wished to bring in for a share of her success. Zélie knew how to play in an operetta just as she knew how to play the piano, that is to say, extremely badly.

Rosine, who did not like Zélie by any means, now made a remark which caused all the musicians in the orchestra to smile : "Ah ! so there is a flat fish in the seraglio."

Zélie was "flat" indeed, but she did not like to hear people say so, especially when she was within hearing, and from that moment she vowed undying hatred against her former friend.

The little scene generally remained unperceived. The stylish public which had come to see Antonia guessed that the improvised goddess was now about to appear. She did indeed arrive walking between two black slaves in melon-shaped turbans, and she made a successful effect, which excited the laughter of the public, by ridding herself of her guardians by giving each of them a ringing slap in the face.

The Grasshopper remembered the time when, a grisette in Bordeaux, she had been light-handed in this same way ; and in memory of her Gascon origin she had made up a costume which showed off all her charms : a silk handkerchief, coquettishly knotted upon her head, a tight bodice, and a short skirt. Her eyes were bright, her head was erect, and her hands were on her hips. She made a very realistic washerwoman—and one fairly imagined that she smelt of garlic. All still went very well when she irreverently apostrophised the Sultan of Cathay, and began her high-seasoned address, making gestures which caused it to be still more suggestive. The dandies present, who are fond of this strongly peppered wording, applauded vociferously ; and Girac was delighted, Rangouze stamped his feet, Rosine and her companions laughed mockingly ; while Méteil turned round to judge of the effect of his prose upon the public.

In the pit, Guénégaud was writhing with laughter, and shouting out "bravos" which almost stunned his neighbours. He seemed to have dined and wined expensively, and some of the gold given him by Tiboulen Aubijoux must have been spent in various beverages. He made so much noise that he finally attracted the attention of Rangouze, who had probably not known before that his clerk was there, for he seemed very much vexed at sight of him.

"That Grasshopper must have been a 'fishwife' somewhere," said Souscarrière, in an under tone. "If it is by speaking in this style that she makes her conquests, I must say——"

"She has conquered Prunavaux, I fancy," rejoined Bautru. "Frédoc perhaps knows all about it, as you say that the notary will be here this evening."

"But he isn't here, the scamp ! He must have heard that I was coming, and doesn't care to meet me."

"Bah ! the play has only just begun. Let us wait."

Antonia, who had now exhausted her supply of Paris slang, came forward to sing her grand air. This was what the public was waiting for, and a hush ran round the house. She had just launched forth her first note when Bautru nudged his uncle's arm, and whispered : " You have not lost your evening. I see Prunavaux."

"You see Prunavaux ?" said Souscarrière. "Where?"

"In a small box on the stage. There he is, leaning out. The delicious accents of Antonia's voice have decided him to emerge from the hole in which he was hiding."

"Yes, indeed, it's he ! Ah, the scoundrel ! He is madly in love with that girl, and, to judge by his look, he must have been made to suffer for it. Everything is clear now, and I am more anxious than ever about Maugars' money."

"I don't think that he has been tampering with it yet, but it is time to think of what is to be done."

"Be easy ! Now that I know how to get hold of him, I shall not let him go without stating my terms to him. I expect him to pay up within twenty-four hours."

The people near by now began to murmur, and the talk between the uncle and nephew came to an end.

Besides, Antonia uttered such piercing sounds that it was impossible not to listen to her. Her sharp voice grated upon the nerves of the audience, who made faces as though they were swallowing some mixture containing verjuice. She went on so fast that she was two or three bars, at least, ahead of the orchestra, and rose to such giddy heights as must infallibly end in a false note. Bautru, who did not lose sight of Pruneaux, amused himself with reading upon the notary's face the impression which his lady-love's singing made upon him. The lawyer looked exactly like a man who follows with an anxious eye the perilous attempts of an acrobat.

The false note came at last, and then Pruneaux drew back into his box, like Punch into his booth at sight of the policeman. There was loud laughter among the audience, and Rosine, seizing the opportunity to execute a friend whom she was jealous of, began to applaud so as to stimulate the public to protest. Escandecat sacrificed himself for his pupil's sake. He made a sign to the leader of the orchestra, who hurried through the air in which Antonia had made so fatal a mistake, and the faithful Zélie coming to the rescue, Sultan Moufhas and the odalisque began a duet, which was intended to cover the bad effect of the prima-donna's solo ; but the duet missed fire also, and fairly flashed in the pan. Zélie, vexed by her friend's mishap, had lost her self-possession, and, to cap the climax, Escandecat, whose emotion got into his throat, missed his famous high note.

The unfortunate manager was in consternation. He saw the credit opened by Antonia's generous protector brought to a sudden close, and as he began to suspect that Pruneaux was really this anonymous "backer," he cast anxious looks towards the little box in which the notary was hiding. Zélie on her side vainly endeavoured to recover her self-possession. The musicians exchanged mocking smiles. Méteil tried to look careless, and shrugged his shoulders to show his acquaintances that he had nothing to do with the musical part of the work.

The Grasshopper alone did not appear to observe the bad effect which she had produced. She struck attitudes, and smiled upon the public. A little more and she would have kissed her hand to them.

"I don't believe that the piece will be allowed to go on," muttered Bautru.

"So much the better," said Souscarrière. "I am anxious to lay my hand upon this *operetta-notary*."

However, the act ended without any accident or further hitch. Antonia's friends were in high good humour, and it did not trouble them how things went, so long as they were entertained. The real public, which might have found fault for not getting its money's worth, was not numerous, and appeared disposed, besides, to look upon the bad singing as owing to the emotion inseparable from a *début*.

"Where are you going, uncle ?" asked Guy of Souscarrière, who, instead of directing himself towards the exit, went towards the corridor near the orchestra as soon as the *entr'acte* began.

"I am going after Pruneaux, of course."

"Behind the scenes? They won't let you go there."

"Bah! if I bribe them they will. I shall manage to get past the male or female Cerberus at the door."

"That's not so sure. Pruneaux evidently desires to maintain his incognito; he appears to be extremely intimate with the manager and Autonia. He must have given strict orders."

"The deuce take his strict orders. I shall go in, I tell you, even if I have to break down the door."

"That's a bad plan," laughed Bautru; "the notary would fly from you then. But I know one dodge worth two of that kind."

"What is it?"

"Métel, the journalist, whom I pointed out to you just now, is in the piece, for he wrote part of the dialogue. He is of course allowed to go behind, and he will take us in."

"Good! where is he?"

"In the street, it seems. He can't stay for half-an-hour without smoking a cigarette. We must go after him. If we don't meet him outside, we shall be sure to find him in the promenade. Come on! If he is behind the scenes I will have a message sent to him."

"Very well, I shouldn't be sorry to breathe for an instant. It is stifling here!"

Bautru dragged his uncle out of the theatre, and scarcely had they set foot upon the pavement than they found the man whom they sought.

Métel was explaining to Girac and Rangouze all the witticisms of the piece, and claiming them as his, declaring that all the stupidity was due to his collaborators. The party surrounded Souscarrière and his nephew, and the latter made haste to introduce Métel to the colonel.

"My dear sir," said Bautru, "my uncle wishes to go behind the scenes to compliment Antonia."

"There is really no occasion to do so," exclaimed the journalist. "She sang like a simpleton, and she is one. She is spoiling all my dialogue. We shan't have the piece played three times if this goes on."

"I am afraid not, but my uncle took supper the other day with the Grasshopper, and—"

"It is very easy to do as he wishes, my dear sir! The manager whom she found in the provinces declares that he won't allow any one to go behind the scenes; but the interdiction doesn't extend to myself or my friends, and if this gentleman wishes we will hear the second act from the wings."

"Very well," says Souscarrière; "then I have time to take a few whiffs at a cigar." And he lit one without losing a second.

Rangouze and Girac appeared very desirous of entering into conversation with the colonel, but Souscarrière was reserved, and followed his nephew whom Métel had drawn aside.

"That gentleman probably takes as much interest as you do in Monsieur de Maugars," said the journalist, lowering his voice so as to be heard only by Bautru and his uncle.

"Monsieur de Maugars is my most intimate friend," replied Souscarrière.

"Then I am happy," rejoined Métel, "to be able to tell you something that you are perhaps ignorant of. You remember the anonymous letter which was addressed to my paper?"

"Yes, of course, and I thank you for not having published it. The circumstance was true, unfortunately, but——"

"I can assure you now that the matter will not have any bad result."

"What do you mean by bad result?" asked Souscarrière, eagerly.

The conversation was going on in the street, where many of the audience had taken advantage of the interval between the acts to get a breath of fresh air. One of the loungers paused before Souscarrière, took his cigar, lit his own by it, without a word, and passed on without bowing.

"Is this the present fashion?" asked the old officer, following the ill-bred individual with his eyes as he walked quietly away.

"Yes," replied Métel, "that is the English style."

"Then I was right in not pulling that *gentleman's* ears. Very well! Go on. You were saying that the matter——"

"Will be buried with Monsieur d'Estelan, who blew out his brains a few days ago in the Bois de Boulogne. Yesterday while I was on business for the newspaper at the prefecture of police I had occasion to see one of the most important functionaries there, and he told me in strict confidence that the body having been recognised, after a somewhat lengthy inquiry, a certificate of the death of Monsieur de Maugars' son-in-law would be drawn up in a couple of days from now and sent to the interested parties."

"Is this quite certain?" asked Bautru.

"Absolutely certain. I know the functionary in question very well, and he would not tell me anything incorrect. I asked him no questions. I only spoke of the anonymous communications which all the newspapers received on the evening of the attempted arrest."

"This information," said Souscarrière, "will not be published in your paper I hope?"

"No. I readily understand that the friends and family of Monsieur de Maugars desire that no recollection of this sad affair should be awakened."

Souscarrière's only reply to this assurance was a firm grasp of the hand. He was delighted to learn that Frédoc's predictions were realised, and that Madeleine would be free at last. Guy, on his side, was no less pleased.

At this moment Girac and Rangouze joined them, having drawn gradually nearer and nearer, and they began to run down poor Antonia's singing. Métel agreed with them, and Bautru had little to say in defence of the performance. Souscarrière did not listen. He was watching the man who had borrowed his cigar, and who was now standing on the middle of the pavement puffing out smoke like a transatlantic steamer.

"Colonel," said Rangouze, politely, "you have let your cigar go out. Let me offer you mine to light it again."

"Thank you," replied Souscarrière. "I can get what I want down there." And he strode towards a gentleman who was smoking near by. Without bowing or speaking he took the stranger's cigar from his mouth, gave it back to him after lighting his own, and turned his back upon him. The amazed individual did not stir.

"What in the world has come over you, uncle?" exclaimed Guy.

"Nothing," replied Souscarrière, "I merely wished to find out whether English manners had become French ones. I see that Monsieur Métel has not deceived me, and that it is now allowable to be rude, for I was so to that gentleman and yet he said not a word."

"But if he had what would you have done?"

"I should have gone to cuff the other one who took a light from my cigar without asking my permission."

This declaration was received with a general laugh. It was clear that Bautru's uncle was an original. Girac was delighted, and determined to tell the anecdote that very night to his friends at the club, and Rangouze was lost in admiration of the giant who talked so coolly of cuffing people's ears. He admired him all the more as being very rich and very generous. Guénégaud had gone to him the evening before to tell him that Guy wished to take back his note before it was due, and he felt certain that Souscarrière had furnished his nephew with the money to pay it.

Rangouze, by the way, was dissatisfied with his clerk. He had lately observed him assuming independent airs, which had made him reflect, and he considered that Guénégaud had no right to be at the theatre on the night of a first performance. He had seen him in the pit, and had given him a look of disapproval, taking care, however, not to make any sign. Guénégaud had the strictest orders never to speak to or recognise his employer in a public place.

"I beg, sir," said Métel to Souscarrière, "that you will allow me to insert your joke in my paper. It will go well in the *Echo* column."

Souscarrière, greatly surprised, was about to ask what joke Métel alluded to, when a man in black came up to Rangouze and said to him in a low tone; "Will you be kind enough, sir, to come for a moment to the stage box on the ground floor, number one on the right? Some one is waiting for you there."

"For me!" exclaimed Rangouze, greatly surprised. "Are you sure that you are not mistaken, sir?"

"Quite sure," replied the man. "Have I not the honour of speaking to Monsieur Jules de Rangouze? Shall I tell the person you are coming?"

"Yes, as soon as the *entr'acte* is over."

The messenger bowed and went into the theatre again. His departure was saluted by an outburst of raillery.

"Gentlemen," said Girac, "some one has fallen in love with Rangouze."

"I congratulate you, my dear fellow," said Métel. "The messenger had quite a Venetian look. The lady will probably be masked."

"Now, I thought that Rangouze was so very strict," said Bautru.

"I suppose that it must be some one who wishes to talk about 'Change—some broker who wishes to give me information. I undertook a somewhat important operation lately."

"Pshaw! a broker wouldn't ask to see you in a private box."

"And on the ground floor, number one, on the right! That is the one where all the screens are pulled up."

"Then Rangouze will find some one else there before him, for Busserolles went in there, and some one invited him, I know. Ah! Busserolles is a lucky fellow!"

"You are mistaken, my dear sir," replied Bautru. "There are two screened boxes on the right. The one in which Madame Aubijoux showed herself for a moment is number three. You may rely on what I say: I know every box in the house."

"True," said Girac. "Madame Aubijoux would scarcely send a messenger who looks like a bailiff."

"That's evident," remarked Métel. "Well, it remains to be seen what princess has sent this black-clad envoy."

Souscarrière did not say a word. The triumphs of Rangouze did not interest him in the least.

A ring announced the end of the *entr'acte*, and stopped the talking.

"My dear sir," said the journalist, addressing Guy's uncle, "I am ready to take you to the side scenes. I presume that you have never trod the stage before, and don't know how to avoid the trap-doors."

"I have been behind the scenes before now. When I came from Africa, thirty years ago, I had some friends at the Jockey Club who had belonged to my regiment, and they very often took me behind the scenes at the opera-house. You needn't be afraid that I shall go down any trap-door."

"Glad to hear it, sir. Follow me. Will you come, Bautru?"

"No. Antonia annoys me, and my uncle doesn't want me."

Souscarriere was about to rebel, but he remembered that his nephew was right in avoiding the society of actresses and gay women, and that he would be in his way when he attempted to bring the ever-flitting Pruneaux to terms. "All right," said he, "I will join you after this act; and then if, as I expect, you have had enough of the music, we will go home to bed."

They parted, and Girae went to talk to Don Manoël, the Brazilian of the club, who had just alighted from a showy equipage. The noble foreigner was still successful at baccarat, and did not lose a chance of appearing in the gay world. Bautru did not regard him with affection since he had lost so much money to him; and accordingly he returned to his stall while his uncle made his way with Métel towards the door by which the stage was reached.

This door was beyond the corridor on the left side, and Rangouze had taken the right hand passage to reach the private box where he was expected. He was somewhat puzzled, but although he said the contrary, he was really inclined to think that some lady wished to speak to him. He found the messenger in front of the box in question, like a soldier mounting guard at his colonel's door, and he wondered what his duties could be.

He was about to address him politely, and ask an explanation of him, when the messenger rapped lightly on the box door, which at this signal was immediately opened.

There was no time for talking or retreating, and Rangouze went in, his hat in his hand and a smile on his face, trying to discover the person who occupied this mysterious stage box. The lights on the stage did not penetrate with more than a glimmer through the blue silk screens, and the individual who mounted guard in the hall had so hastily closed the door that the box was partly dark.

Seeing only an uncertain outline before him, Rangouze began to believe that an attempt was being made to mystify him, when a voice spoke and begged him to be seated. All his illusions vanished at once, for the voice was that of a man, and a very deep one too.

"I beg your pardon," said Rangouze, "there is probably some mistake."

At this moment the brass instruments in the orchestra blew a blast to announce the rising of the curtain, and Rangouze did not catch the reply, but a hand was laid upon his arm and he was drawn towards a chair on which he was constrained to seat himself.

"Excuse me, my dear sir," resumed the voice, when the storm of sound had subsided. "I wished to see you as soon as possible on an important matter; I saw you in the auditorium and I sent to ask you to come here. Don't you recognise me? There is not much light in this box. That's true; but I am Monsieur Aubijoux."

The millionaire's name produced an immense effect on Rangouze, who

professed to feel profound respect for the person who bore it, and for all the "big" financial men in general. He did not approach them as often as he would have liked. M. Aubijoux, especially, kept him at a distance whenever he met him on 'Change or elsewhere. So the ambitious young fellow was very much flattered at being summoned by the merchant prince, and much preferred being with him to talking to the prettiest woman in Paris.

"Oh, sir," cried he, "don't excuse yourself, pray. I am entirely at your orders and shall be only too happy to be able to serve you in any way."

"Thank you," said the merchant, with indifference. "I learned by chance that you were able to furnish me with some information which I need before engaging in a speculation in which I am quite disposed to give you a share."

"Ask me whatever you wish, sir. I bless the chance that brought you here."

"Where you did not expect to see me?"

"I was told that you were travelling."

"I came back this morning and called upon you."

"Did you indeed take that trouble? If I had only known, I—"

"I did not leave my name; my day was taken up, and I intended to see you in the evening at the club where you usually dine."

"If you had written to me I should have hastened to—"

"I did not wish to disturb you, and beside, I learned that you were to be present, with almost all your friends, at the *début* of this young woman who is sometimes mentioned in the financial world, as she has some dealings on 'Change. I don't dislike operetta, and so I took a box. I am glad that I did so, as you have come. You have been kind enough to leave your seat to come here, so you will remain until the next act? We cannot hear ourselves speak while the singing is going on."

"I will do whatever you wish," replied the Provençal, who was perfectly delighted with all this.

An aria boldly sung in a sharp tone by the fearless Grasshopper interrupted these conversational preliminaries. M. Aubijoux appeared to take some little pleasure in listening, and Rangouze was careful not to disturb him. He remained respectfully seated somewhat behind the chair of the high and mighty merchant who did him the great honour of listening in his company to Antonia's roulade.

He puzzled his brain in the meantime to guess what kind of service he could render M. Aubijoux. He knew that he did not amount to much in comparison to this wealthy financier, but he also knew that there is no hierarchy in business, and that the highest do not scorn to have recourse to those who can be useful to them. "Full often have we need of others less than ourselves," said La Fontaine, and among speculators this is frequently true.

Rangouze, besides, had made money—in a dishonest way, no doubt—but a good deal of it. He said to himself that the first million is always the hardest to earn, and that, from his starting-point to his present position, the distance was further than from M. Aubijoux's. He was not a man to draw back from anything. But he was surprised that M. Aubijoux should send for him to talk about business in a box at the theatre, and that he should so carefully conceal himself in this dark corner. He was trying to account for all this when he suddenly remembered that

Madame Aubijoux was also hidden in box No. 3, and that only a slight partition separated her from her husband.

Thinking of the probable nature of Madame Aubijoux's interview with Busserolles, Rangouze now began to reflect upon the extremely disastrous effect of an encounter between the husband and the wife in the lobby, for it was evident that neither of them suspected the other's presence in the theatre. Madame Aubijoux was not alone. She had arrived before her husband, had shown herself but for a moment, and when M. Aubijoux had raised the screens of his box he had not been seen from the front at all.

Now, Rangouze had no wish to lose the present excellent and unhesitated chance of adding to his gains by obliging the merchant prince, and he hardly cared to have the interview curtailed by the husband meeting his wife and her lover in the lobby, or overhearing their conversation. To what might he not attain in the great financial world, after this? To what height might he not soar? And yet everything might be upset by the exit of Busserolles with Madame Aubijoux on his arm from private box No. 3.

"I must try to get Aubijoux out of the theatre," thought Guénégaud's unscrupulous employer. "I should spare him painful suppositions, do his wife a great service, and, what is still better, not lose this valuable chance. Let me only find a good pretext to get him away and all will be safe."

This was by no means easy, but Antonia, without intending or wishing to do so, came to the rescue. In a trio which followed the rise of the curtain, she indulged in such musical extravagances that the audience loudly expressed its disapproval. There was, indeed, hissing enough to make every one stop up their ears. And in addition came whistling, laughter, and stamping, and offensive remarks addressed to the singer herself.

"The deuce!" exclaimed M. Aubijoux, "they will be breaking the seats the next thing. I am afraid we shall have no chance for a serious talk here. Do you care to remain?"

"Oh, no! not in the least," replied Rangouze.

"Well, we will go to my house, then. My carriage can bring you back in an hour."

This proposal suited Rangouze exactly, and he enthusiastically accepted it.

He and Aubijoux left the box just as Souscarrière, now behind the scenes, walked up to Pruneaux, who, at the beginning of the disturbance, had come forth from his hiding place.

X.

M. AUBIJOUX's carriage, a very elegant affair, drawn by a pair of superb horses, had been rolling along for some time, carrying away from the theatre both its owner and the clandestine money-lender, who no longer feared a scene between the husband and the wife.

The messenger in black had climbed up beside the coachman, and the theatre had been left without any meeting between the married couple—the wife not yet having left her box. The husband had no suspicion, for he was very gay and jested about Antonia's false notes, railed at the pre-

tensions of ambitious women who will show themselves in public whether they are talented or not, and at the folly of the admirers of such women who place money in the hands of managers to give them an opportunity of exhibiting themselves. Rangouze joked as much as M. Aubijoux did, and tried to amuse him by telling him all the scandal he could think of.

The money-lender was delighted at thus familiarly conversing with the rich financier who had so long held aloof from him. He was even somewhat surprised that M. Aubijoux should prolong matters in this style, for he was always anxious to come at once to the question of business; but he did not dare approach the matter on hand, first because he feared to appear indiscreet, and secondly because experience had taught him that in negotiations it is better to let the other party make the advances.

He was also surprised that the ride lasted so long, for he had expected to be taken to the Boulevard Poissonnière. M. Aubijoux had extensive offices there, where he always received his numerous clients and customers. But the brougham was going toward Auteuil, that is to say, towards the château where Madame Aubijoux gave such splendid entertainments.

Rangouze, as may be imagined, could only feel flattered at being admitted there in this confidential way, and he decided to profit by the circumstance in the present and the future. To a speculator just starting, it is a great advantage to be allowed to enter the private abode of a financial prince, instead of having to accost him amid his clerks, like any other broker. To what did Rangouze owe such favour? He could not guess, but had he known the real intentions of the important personage whom he accompanied, he would not have rejoiced so greatly at traversing Paris in his society. It may even be supposed that he would have left him half way.

Three days had M. Aubijoux given to preparing this interview with Marius Guénégaud's employer, three days which he had taken from his business, leaving his wife to suppose that he was still travelling. He had, indeed, left Paris on the morrow of the ball, and since he had returned he had not appeared at his villa at Auteuil, or at his office on the Boulevard Poissonnière. No stranger had seen him, or knew of his return from the journey which he had undertaken in the interest of Estelan. The only person who had any knowledge of the matter was a man whom he had brought into his life, so to speak, thirty years before.

He had taken him to the Fantaisies Comique, and at that moment this man occupied a seat upon the box of the carriage. Rangouze had taken him for an agent of some kind, and he was not mistaken, for this man had aided and abetted M. Aubijoux under the most trying circumstances. He had been the companion of his childhood, but he retained the position of a subordinate, because he preferred so to do. He might have been the sub-director of the important and influential commercial business established by M. Aubijoux, but he preferred the modest position of confidant and privy-councillor.

The clerks knew him, because they sometimes met him in their employer's office, but they had no idea how important a man he was. Madame Aubijoux had scarcely ever seen him, and only on rare occasions, crossing the villa-park, perhaps. She had never asked his name, and the servants took him for some poor relation.

Jacques Le Pailleur, however, filled with the great financier much the same office which the famous Capucin monk who was called "His Grey Eminence" filled beside Cardinal Richelieu. Jacques Le Pailleur was the

Father Joseph of the commercial Richelieu, but he never caused his power to be felt, and he carried his devotion to the verge of fanaticism.

He would even have sacrificed his life and honour to Jean Aubijoux, if there had been need of it. Both men had been born in inferior positions; they had grown up together, had never left one another, and if they had not gone hand in hand in conquering fortune it was because Jacques was indifferent to wealth. He had inherited some little property, which amply sufficed for his wants, and he had but one passion, friendship; which he understood as few understand it in this age of egotism. He lived for Jean Aubijoux as he might have done for some beloved woman. He enjoyed his triumphs, suffered from his sorrows, and had no will save that of this brother of his choice. His only ambition was to see him attain to still greater eminence, and his whole happiness lay in saying: "He is rich, honoured, and beloved," and in serving him in all things. If it were necessary to start off suddenly for South America, or to conduct some secret and delicate investigation, Jacques was always ready. And then when the matter was finished successfully he would retire into obscurity and wait for a fresh occasion for seconding his dear Jean.

This Pylades lived at Passy in a small house belonging to him, and spent his leisure hours in cultivating his garden. There it was that Aubijoux went for him whenever he needed his advice or assistance, and he had gone there very often of late.

Rangouze, however sharp he might be, could not guess all this.

Just as the drive was nearly at an end, for they were approaching the Avenue d'Eylau, M. Aubijoux roused himself. "If I am not mistaken, my dear sir," he said, "you formerly lived at Marseilles?"

"Yes, sir," said Rangonze, somewhat surprised; "but I have not lived there for a long time now."

"No matter. You know the place, you are intelligent and observing. You must be able to tell me what would be the chances of an extensive undertaking which I am thinking of. It is useless to add that, as I consult you about it, I propose offering you a share in it if it suits you."

"It will suit me if you think it a good investment," said Rangouze, "and I shall be most happy to be associated with you in it."

"I think highly of your opinion, as I have seen you show business ability such as is seldom met with among society men." Rangouze bowed with a modest air, and M. Aubijoux added, at once: "I am in the habit of judging men, and my idea of them is usually correct. The connection which we have hitherto had together has been but slight, but still sufficient for me to form my own views. Besides, I will not conceal from you that in the affairs which I am about to speak of you may be useful to me, and more so than a regular business man. I need some one who will second me without its being known that he is doing so."

"If that be all——"

"He must also have intelligence and activity, two qualities which I know you to possess. The only thing which I wish to find out is whether you have sufficient knowledge as to the matter in hand. Marseilles," added M. Aubijoux, "is the great centre of the oil trade in France?"

"Yes, and you could not have questioned a person who knew more about that. I was formerly in a firm which speculated in that line, and I know all about the operations which are carried on and their results."

"If such be the case, my dear sir, the matter is settled. You shall be

my secret representative. I wish to buy up, without letting any competitors know of it, all the oil trade with Senegal."

"That can be done, but a very large capital is requisite, and I have but—"

"Don't disturb yourself about what you may bring into it. I will undertake to furnish any amount of funds, and only ask you to devote yourself to the matter. You were saying that you had already been interested in a firm which carried on this trade. That is all very well; but don't you think that, as you were formerly with the firm you speak of, you may be embarrassed when we begin to act against its interests."

"Not at all; it no longer exists."

"Ah, that is another thing."

"The person who was at the head of this firm is dead—after losing a considerable amount of money. I had a share in the losses, and the experience which I gained then will be of use to me now."

"Undoubtedly. When we know where the snags are we can keep our boat clear of them. May I ask you the name of the unskilful dealer who became poor when he ought to have grown rich?"

"His name was Vernègue. He was a man of little account in any way. I believe him to have been a poor business man, and I was never so foolish as to entrust any funds to him. The money which I had in his hands came to me through an inheritance."

"I understand. You had not time to withdraw it, but you watched what was done with it, and knew what was going on."

"Yes; I had not been trained to business life, but my tastes lay in that direction. I had a natural faculty for commercial speculation."

"And what you have since attempted has not turned out so badly, for I know that you have considerably increased your means since you settled in Paris. I conclude from that, my dear sir, that we shall understand each other as soon as I have explained the basis of the affair to you. I have all the papers necessary to give you an idea of what I intend to undertake. We have reached my country seat, and I shan't detain you long. After our talk is over you can return to the theatre, if you like to hear the hissing at the end of the piece."

The brougham drew up before a gate which was not the same as that by which Madame Aubijoux's guests had entered the grounds on the night of the fancy ball. The park had several gates in fact, and the largest one was only opened on reception days. M. Aubijoux alighted from the carriage, and Rangouze hastily did the same. The man in black had already sprung from the box and was inserting a key in the lock of the gate.

The night was fine, and the moon, now in its last quarter, silvered the tops of the trees. The villa was visible at the end of a long pathway, but the financier did not direct his steps towards it. He turned to the left, taking a path which led to a separate building.

"There," he said, pointing to an elegant little chalet, "we can talk there without being interrupted. Would you believe that I have not yet seen my wife? I only arrived this morning. She does not know that I have returned."

Rangouze tried to think of something polite to say, but failed. He knew only too well where Madame Aubijoux was, and did not care to mix up the financier's domestic affairs with his own. He allowed himself to be led into a room like a parlour on the ground floor of the chalet, which was dimly lighted. The man in black remained outside. Rangouze

waited for M. Aubijoux to invite him to sit down, but his host, after opening a window and lowering the blind, turned to him, looked him in the face, and coolly said : "Your name is not Jules de Rangouze. It is Jules Rascaillon."

Had a thunderbolt fallen at Rangouze's feet he could not have been more frightened than he was on hearing his real name spoken by the financier. He recoiled as he replied : "I—I do not understand."

"You will understand," replied M. Aubijoux. "But first of all I warn you that it would be vain for you to endeavour to avoid the explanation which I insist upon having with you. The doors of this chalet are fastened, and a man in my service is on the watch."

"But I am not thinking of flying from here, sir. I am wondering what may be the object of this joke, for it is one, no doubt."

"You are mistaken, or rather you pretend to be, for you know very well that I am not joking. Listen to me and don't interrupt me. You can reply afterwards, when I question you."

"You speak as though you were my judge. By what right do you do so?"

"I will tell you presently. At present I repeat to you that you are Rascaillon. You have taken the name of Jules de Rangouze, and you pass for a country gentleman. It was not a thing for you to shrink from, as you wished to change your identity. You had your reasons for that. You say that you were Monsieur Vernègue's partner, and that he was in the oil trade. You lie! You were nothing but his clerk."

The false Rangouze listened and hung his head, not attempting to refute this threatening exordium. He was trying to collect himself in order to reply, and gradually recovered his coolness.

"You left Marseilles after the death of that worthy man," continued M. Aubijoux, "and you went to Algiers, where you carried on various nefarious trades."

"You are free to insult me," replied Rangouze, trying to look dignified. "Here, in your house, I am not able to reply to your assertions, but to-morrow when I am free you must give me satisfaction for your outrages."

"Don't play the bully. I know what you are," replied the merchant, calmly. "You cannot refute the truths I tell you, either to-morrow or ever. I have a good deal more to say, so let me finish. You came to Paris some years ago, and as you had already amassed a neat sum by all sorts of unlawful business you thought that the time had come to make a show. You changed your name, pretended to be a nobleman, got into the society of some young men of good family, and, thanks to the easy ways of a certain circle, succeeded in being received as a member of a club composed of honest men."

"I flatter myself that I have many friends."

"Who would turn their backs upon you if they knew you as I do, and knew your past."

"My past! I surely need not blush for it. Supposing that I have led any other than an idle life, I need not blush for having worked. And if, for reasons known to myself, I have seen fit to change my name, I am not the only one. It is done every day."

"If that were all I should never have troubled myself about you."

"I am anxious to know what you have to reproach me with."

"And I am anxious to know whence you derive your money, for you are rich now, and very rich."

"Not so rich as you think, but I don't hide what I am worth. Why should I? I have earned it honestly, in business, like yourself. Would you like to know what I do with my money? I use it all in commercial enterprises. You have a part of it, as you have taken me into some of your matters, but not largely—unfortunately."

M. Aubijoux listened without a word to this attempted justification, and resumed after a short pause: "You have quite forgotten the most productive of all the concerns you have in hand, the one that brings you in much more than your commercial business."

"I cannot imagine what you mean."

"I mean that you lend out money at forty per cent."

"That is an infamous slander! I defy any one to prove that he has borrowed any money of me."

"From you, no. You are too skilful to be an usurer yourself. But you have a man who does your dirty work for you. Oh, don't protest! He lives in the Rue des Vinaigriers, and his name is Marius Guénégaud. You see that I am well informed on the subject."

"I don't know any such man," muttered Rangouze, whom this unexpected stroke had again thrown off his balance.

"Shall I tell you where I knew him? Many people in Marseilles could tell you as well as I, for he hasn't changed his name. He was a porter on the wharf, ten years ago, and worked for that unfortunate man Vernègue, who employed you to keep his books. Guénégaud did not grow rich by such work as he did, and at last he came here. You picked him up in the Paris streets, and decided to employ him in your rascally business. Come, don't deny it. I have these particulars from Guénégaud himself."

"Guénégaud is a scamp whom I rescued from poverty because he was my fellow townsman, and now as a reward for my kindness he wants to blackmail me. But I defy him to prove what he asserts."

"You are wrong. Proofs of it are abundant. It is sufficient to question the people whom you have sent to him,—the people whom you associate with and of whose friendship you boast. I know two of them for my own part. I will tell you who they are, if you like."

Rangouze, crestfallen and driven into his last entrenchments, felt that he could no longer struggle upon the same ground, and that he must try to save himself by impudence.

"You need not do so, sir," he said in the most arrogant tone, "and I call upon you to explain what you are driving at with all your questions. You are not a magistrate. What are my actions to you? I do as I please, and you have no right to call me to account."

"I should not do so, if you were only an usurer," replied M. Aubijoux, calmly.

"You have insulted me enough. What do you want?"

"I wish to force you to confess that you are a thief."

"This is too much, and I shall not stoop to justify myself."

"You could not. Listen attentively to me. In the month of September, 1870, a drawer in which Monsieur Vernègue had placed thirty-three thousand francs was broken open and the money was taken from it. You stole it."

"That is absurd! You are probably not aware that the thief was known."

"He has never been arrested."

"No, because he is dead. He was killed during the war with

Germany. It was a man named Vallouris who worked at Monsieur Vernègue's place when I was there."

"Are you quite sure that he is dead?"

This question startled Rangouze, who turned somewhat pale and replied in an unsteady voice: "The proof that he is dead is that nothing has been done in the matter. The search was given up years ago."

"No. It was suspended, but the limitation of ten years is not yet up; it won't be up for three months yet, and if the criminal suit is taken up again it won't be against Vallouris."

"Against whom, then?"

"Against an infamous rascal, a miserable wretch who, well aware of the fact that his comrade was about to leave Marseilles, committed the theft himself. He relied upon the absent man being accused, and he was not mistaken. No one suspected him—himself—and he enjoyed the stolen money in peace. He thought himself secure, for Vallouris was not there to justify himself. Monsieur Vernègue was dead. So Rascaillon left Marseilles, relying upon being forgotten, and took good care not to return there. He made money elsewhere. He was Rascaillon no more, and Monsieur de Rangouze did not fear anything further until an hour ago. But the day of reckoning has come."

"I must compliment you, sir. You have a rare faculty for romance. What is going to be the finish of this pretty little novel?"

"The finish will be this: Vallouris is alive; he will present himself, and the wretch for whose crime he has almost undergone a shameful conviction will be confounded in his turn and sentenced to the penalty."

"I defy him. I do not know whether he is dead or not, but if he is alive, as you assert, and dares to show himself, he will go straight to prison, for there has been a warrant out against him for ten years."

"He might go to prison, but he would not stay there long, I can assure you, and Rascaillon would go there in his place."

"Then you imagine that the law will contradict itself and release a man whom the facts accuse and arrest another man who occupies a most honourable position?"

"Honourable? that is too much!" said M. Anbijoux, scornfully. "This man is rich and has not yet been suspected, but when it is proved to the judge that he is an usurer, the respect which he enjoys without deserving it will vanish; and it will be worse when it is shown that his fortune could only have had the theft of Vernègue's thirty-three thousand francs as a starting-point."

"That will be hard to show," sneered Rangouze.

"I will undertake to show it very clearly. You believe that everything is forgotten, and that you cannot be followed step by step from the Rue de la Darse, where you robbed your employer, to the Rue de Madrid, where you fleeced your club friends. You are mistaken. The task was not an easy one, but it was undertaken, and is now completed. I directed the search at Marseilles, and a person who represents me directed it at Algiers. We needed time, and what gave us most trouble was the finding of Rascaillon, whose track was lost after his return to France. But we have already perfectly demonstrated, by proof that cannot be denied, that at Marseilles, before the robbery, Rascaillon had not a penny of his own; that after the theft, until he went to Algiers, he could not have earned any money whatever; and, finally, that on arriving at Algiers, without being hacked by any one, he opened an exchange office

in the Rue de la Marine. We have even found a Jew who was at that time in business relations with him, and who knows what amount Rascaillon disposed of. It corresponded exactly with what he had stolen from Vernègue. What do you say to all that, Monsieur Jules de Rangouze? Do you think that my statements will be credited when I bring forward ten honourable witnesses? I have twice been a judge of the Chamber of Commerce of Paris."

The usurer, crushed by the accusing words of Louis d'Estelan's defender, did not dare to raise his head, but had the pitiable mien of an accused culprit before the public prosecutor. He felt that he was conquered, and yet he did not give up the struggle. He thought of some way of escaping; he asked himself why M. Aubijoux overwhelmed him like this, and suddenly remembered what he had seen at the Fantaisies Comiques: Madame Aubijoux, half-hidden in a private box, signalling to the handsome Busserolles, and shutting herself up with him. He did not yet quite realise how he could turn this secret to account, but he felt that he might, perhaps, use it as a weapon against the deceived husband who had made himself his judge, and so he changed his method of defence.

"What interest have you in ruining me?" he asked, raising his head.

"None, whatever," replied M. Aubijoux, frankly, "but I wish to clear an innocent man."

"Vallouris?"

"Yes, Vallouris; and I can only prove his innocence by giving the true culprit up to justice."

"Then you undertake to arrest me on your own private authority, and take me by force to the police station?"

"Yes, if I am compelled to do so."

"How can I avoid this unpleasant journey, if you please?"

"Don't jest," coldly replied the merchant. "It depends upon you to escape the assize court."

"Again I ask, how can I escape it?" said Rangouze, still in a mocking tone.

"You must confess everything."

"Confess! You wish me to admit that I am a thief! That is really a very strange method of getting out of my difficulty, and you will oblige me greatly by telling me what I should gain by following your kind advice."

"I will explain. You care more for your liberty than for your reputation, I suppose?"

"I care for both."

"And if you left France you would be dishonoured; but you would avoid several years' imprisonment, and with your fortune you might live handsomely in foreign parts."

"I don't wish to be disgraced."

"You will be, no matter what may happen."

"Why?"

"Because, even admitting that you were acquitted, admitting even that the investigating magistrate gave an order to declare the accusation null and void, you would be none the less lost in public opinion. I shall publish everywhere that you are a money-lender under a false name; that you shamefully fleece the people among whom you live. You will be driven from your club; cut and banished by the friends whom you have made your victims, for there is no possible doubt of it, Guénégaud will

speak out. He has promised me to do so. He is devoted to me and no longer needs you. I shall take care of his future. He will relate all the rascallities into which you have dragged him, by taking advantage of his poverty, and you won't simply be cut by your acquaintance, for the law will intervene to punish your illegal method of lending, and you have gone on with this unlawful system for years. So, with all this, you are exposed, not only to imprisonment, but to a fine which is *double the amount of the sums lent*. This simply implies ruin. Have you looked at that side of the question?"

"You wish to ruin me," said Rangouze, curtly. "Well then, try it!"

"That is your last word?"

"Yes, unless you make proposals which I can accept."

"I have but one to make. You know what it is."

"It is absurd. You ask me to confess myself a thief. If I were fool enough to listen to you, I should be sure to be convicted. I might as well ask a policeman to arrest me."

"I do not ask you to confess to a court, or even to a magistrate."

"To whom, then?"

"To me, and two witnesses of my selection. When this is done, I will take you to the frontier myself. Oh! don't be alarmed; I will allow you to take your fortune with you. It must be easy to carry if, as I suppose, it is in your safe."

"Good! what then?"

"Then you will be condemned although absent; but that won't trouble you, for you can easily go where there is no extradition law."

"Will you be satisfied with a verbal confession?"

"No. I require one written by you, and a very full and explicit one. You must give a circumstantial account of the robbery you committed at Marseilles in the month of September, 1870, being careful to state that Louis Vallouris had nothing whatever to do with it, and that you chose the night on which he left for Paris, well knowing that he would be accused."

"In other words, you wish me to sign my own condemnation."

"You understand me perfectly."

"Yes; but I don't see what benefit I derive from this capitulation."

"You will save your person and your ill-gotten wealth."

"But if I refuse?"

"If you refuse, I shall shut you up in this chalet, where you will be kept in sight to-night; and to-morrow, at dawn, I shall go to the prefect of police and the public prosecutor. They will receive me, never fear. I am not a nobody, and they know my name. I will set forth the facts without omitting anything, and give them proofs on the spot, for my witnesses are ready. You may say that I can be prosecuted for arbitrary arrest. I don't care for that, and I will take the risk of it, but be sure that nothing will follow. Your guilt will be so clearly shown that the law will thank me for giving up a malefactor who was sure of escaping. You will be arrested, you will be brought to trial, and I can assure you that you won't get off. But this is not all. Guénégaud will give me the names of the unfortunate persons whom you have fleeced. I shall go to each and all of them and hand over the list to the interested parties, and—"

"Enough! If I accept your conditions you will promise me not to speak of my affairs—those which that rascally Marius managed?"

"Yes."

"What is there to prove that you will keep your promise?"

"Nothing. I am an honest man. You know me to be so. That is enough."

Silence ensued. Rangouze walked feverishly up and down, and did not hasten to reply. He felt that he was trapped, and he prayed the devil to send him some tricky plan which would help him out of the terrible dilemma. "It is in Vallouris' interest, then, that you wish me to inculpate myself?"

"It is."

"Then why do you give me the choice between flight and arrest? Give me up at once. You will much more easily attain your aim, which is to clear Vallouris."

"No; for your written confession would clear him much better than a trial. If I gave you up you would deny everything."

"You may be sure that I shall do all I can to defend myself."

"I expect that, and wish to avoid it. I wish to save Vallouris from the scandal of a lawsuit in which he would be obliged to appear."

"As an accused party, I suppose? He is arrested, no doubt."

"What does that matter to you? I repeat that I wish to rid him of an iniquitous charge without the fact that he has been accused becoming known. When I utilise the declaration which you must write you will be abroad, and then the affair cannot be brought to trial. Everything will be managed by the magistrates, Vallouris, myself, and the witnesses retained by me."

"They may condemn me to ten years' imprisonment. Thank you!"

"You won't undergo the penalty, for you will be abroad. You could even return to France in twenty years' time."

"A pleasant prospect!"

"Better than being condemned while you are here, and stripped of all you possess. The fine for usury would ruin you, don't forget that, while in America you can carry on your operations without being troubled. 'Legal interest' is not thought of there."

Rangouze stopped walking. He had paused in front of the window, and had suddenly thought of the trick he wanted. Looking M. Aubijoux in the face, he said, in a careless tone: "You talk of the law of limitation. In civil matters it is available after twenty years; but only ten are necessary to limit criminal action."

"That is true."

"This means, then, that, as the theft was committed in September, 1870, in three months' time from now Vallouris and I would both be beyond the reach of the law."

"Yes, you would be, as you have never been prosecuted; but Vallouris has been prosecuted, and recently, I may as well tell you. So the law of limitation does him no good."

"So much the worse for him. I must think of myself first. He can wait."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that on the 15th of September next I can, without running any risk, sign the declaration you ask for."

"Do you imagine that I shall consent to this arrangement?"

"Why not? My confession will save your friend Vallouris just as well in three months as now, and I shall not be obliged to expatriate myself."

"Yes, I see," said the merchant in a sarcastic tone. "You have come

to the conclusion that in three months you will have nothing further to fear from justice, and that if I denounced you my complaint could not take effect. You would have a good opportunity to deride and defy me. No, I refuse to agree to this ingenious arrangement."

"Excuse me! If I signed the document this evening you would not doubt my good faith, and if you swore not to use my confession before the 15th of September, I would take your word for it. But you must also promise not to speak of my business in the Rue des Vinaigriers."

"And do you imagine that I would prolong the frightful situation in which you have placed an innocent man? Don't think it. If I consent to treat with you, it is in order that Vallouris may be vindicated at once. Choose between the confession, with liberty to leave France, or arrest and all its consequences. I am waiting," concluded M. Aubijoux, pointing to an inkstand, pens, and paper laid out upon the buhl-table on which a couple of lamps were standing.

"You take a strange advantage of my situation," exclaimed Rangouze, "you have laid a regular trap for me; do you know what all this is? It is *black mail*."

M. Aubijoux shrugged his shoulders.

"And I, if I choose, can threaten you," added Rangouze.

"With what?"

"With publishing a fact which I am acquainted with, and which would grieve you greatly."

"I care very little for anything you could say about me."

"About you? Oh, there is nothing to be said about you. You have millions of money, you are strong and can brave the world. If you even had crimes upon your conscience, no one would dare accuse you. But your wife is open to attack."

The merchant started up in anger, but restrained himself at once. "Don't hope to shake my resolution by any base slander," he said, scornfully. "Write the confession which I am about to dictate, or else tomorrow morning, I declare it to you, you will be obliged to explain yourself before a magistrate."

"Very well. I shall 'explain' that you are denouncing me as an act of revenge, because I saw Madame Aubijoux to-night with a handsome young man in a private box."

"Wretch!"

"Yes; in a stage-box next to the one you occupied but an hour ago, at the Fantaisies Comiques. Several persons in the audience saw what I saw, but will perhaps have the gallantry to keep silent. But I shall speak out. Why should I spare you when you don't spare me?"

"You lie!" cried the merchant, coming forward with his fists clenched, as Rangouze drew back toward the window, and continued speaking: "If you wish to convince yourself of what I say, you have only to return to the theatre. The box is on the ground floor on the right. It is No. 3. We were in No. 1, and through the thin partition which separates them, you might have heard what your wife was saying, if the orchestra had played less loudly. Go, sir! Your brougham is at the door, and the play is not yet over. Your wife must still be at the theatre."

While he spoke the rascal heard a sound outside. "No," he resumed, in a lower tone, "she is not there now—she is walking in the park, and not alone, for I recognise the voice of the man who is with her."

Furious and in despair, M. Aubijoux dashed Rangouze aside with one

hand, and drew up the blind. The moon was shining very high in the sky, and it was almost as light as at day-time. Under the window there was a narrow grass-plot and three tall trees, with a bench in front of them. Now upon this bench a woman was seated, and Aubijoux recognised her at once. A man was kneeling before her. In the soft light of the silvery planet so dear to lovers the group was distinctly visible against a background of dark foliage. M. Aubijoux uttered a cry of rage at the sight, and darted into the garden.

Rangouze did not stir, but looked on and waited. He blessed the chance which had brought about this unexpected diversion, and made ready to profit by it. He had excited the merchant's jealousy to divert his anger from himself. Russian hunters, flying from wolves, throw out their dogs from their sleighs to arrest the pursuit for an instant, and Rangouze had sacrificed the imprudent Léonie and the usually prudent Busseroles to Louis Vallouris' avenger.

He relied upon escaping from the chalet while the merchant pursued the offered prey. The couple would certainly be sacrificed, for M. Aubijoux was shouting : "Here, Jacques, come here, make haste!" and was evidently quite beside himself with rage.

The startled lovers did not lose their wits, but rose at once, and ran away as fast as they could. This was certainly a wise course, for the husband was a man to kill them both, and the faithful Le Pailleur had hastened to assist his friend.

When he joined him, the fugitives had already disappeared in the dark and winding avenue. "What is the matter?" asked Jacques. "Is the thief trying to make off?" The worthy fellow was thinking of Rangouze. Busseroles and Madame Aubijoux had no doubt arrived by a little gate at the other end of the park, and as he had not left his post he had not seen them.

"You have your revolver," said Aubijoux. "Give it to me!"

Jacques took a six-chambered revolver from his pocket, and replied : "Be careful what you do."

But the merchant was not likely to listen to these wise words of warning. Without taking time to explain or reply, he darted, revolver in hand, after the guilty pair. He was some distance behind, and did not see them now, but he thought that they had fled to the side gate, and would not try to reach the main entrance, which was closed at this hour and in charge of a doorkeeper.

"You shall not escape me," he muttered ; and there were chances that this might prove true, for Aubijoux had strong limbs and keen eyes.

The side gate opened upon a bye street communicating with the boulevard, and at a short distance from it a victoria stood waiting. The lover whom it had brought was running as fast as he could towards it, but he still had some distance to cover.

Aubijoux fired at him. The first shot was a miss, but the second one wounded him in the shoulder. A third shot failed like the first. Meantime Busseroles tottered, and seemed about to fall, but gathering up his strength, he reached the vehicle and sprang in. The coachman saw what the situation was, and briskly whipped up his horse, which tore away, darting down the Avenue Raphaël.

Aubijoux attempted to follow it, but his strength failed him. He stopped and saw that on the spot where the bullet had struck the fugitive the pavement was stained with blood.

"He is wounded!" he muttered. "I shall find him again. Now I will find her!" And so saying, he rushed quickly back towards the villa.

His wife must still be there, for she had not gone off when her lover disappeared. Where had she hidden herself? Had she had the courage to return to the house and brave the curious eyes of the servants who were still up, for it was not yet midnight! Or, paralysed by terror, was she crouching down in some corner of the park?

Scarcely had M. Aubijoux entered the grounds again than he found himself face to face with his friend Jacques. The worthy fellow was out of breath, and in a state of great agitation. His first exclamation was: "Is he dead?"

"Unfortunately, no," replied the husband.

"Fortunately, on the contrary. If you had killed this Rascaillon, you would be in a very bad plight."

"What do I care for Rascaillon? Didn't you see anything?"

"I saw that you were running like a madman after some one who ran faster than you did, and I thought that it was he."

"It was my wife's lover."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"I tell you that on opening the summer house window, I recognised Léonie, seated upon a bench. A man was kneeling before her, and held her hands in his. I leaped to the ground, they saw me and fled, and hid behind the bushes. I pursued them, and saw the man again in the street. I fired and wounded him, but I am going to kill her. Come, let us look for her!"

"Jean, you must be mistaken. It is impossible that your wife should have—"

"I tell you that I am going to kill her," interrupted Aubijoux, furiously.

"You won't kill her without giving her a hearing. I shan't leave you, and I will prevent you from committing a murder. It is too much already that you have seriously wounded some unfortunate man who has perhaps not done you any wrong. This isn't the way to revenge yourself if he has. You will publish the shame of the woman who bears your name."

This earnest adjuration did not calm Aubijoux, but forced him to reflect. "So be it, then!" he said choking with rage. "I will hear her before condemning her. I will force her to confess her crime, but when she has confessed I shall not hesitate to punish her. She has perhaps had the audacity to go back to her room. I am going there. Close this gate and promise me not to open it if the infamous creature comes into the garden."

"I promise it upon condition that you will return me the revolver."

"Take it. You are right. I am no longer master of myself."

"That is well! If I find your wife, I will bring her back to you. When you question your servants, try to let nothing appear."

Aubijoux did not listen. He had taken his way toward the villa. But his friend no longer feared his violence, for he held the weapon, and as an additional precaution he now removed the three cartridges which remained in it. After doing this, he began to search through the park, of which he knew every turn.

Meanwhile the distracted merchant found one of his footmen talking gaily with Madame Aubijoux's maid. They seemed greatly surprised on seeing him, for everybody in the house, like his wife herself, had thought that he was travelling.

"Where is your mistress?" he curtly asked.

"She has not yet returned," said the maid. "She has gone to the theatre."

From the girl's manner, and the plainness of her reply, Aubijoux saw that she was telling the truth, so far as she knew it.

"When she returns," said he, "tell her that I have returned, and shall sleep in the chalet. I am very tired, and shall not see her till to-morrow morning. I don't need anything to-night."

His servants, who were accustomed to his odd ways, did not notice the peculiarity of these orders, and, after giving them, Aubijoux hastened into the park again in search of Jacques whom he joined in the wide avenue where he had so eloquently defended Estelan to Bautru's uncle. Le Pailleur was alone, and guessed the question that Aubijoux had on his lips.

"She is not in the park," said he.

"It is impossible to tell where she is," exclaimed the husband. "She is not at the house, either. Where can she be? You have had time to look everywhere."

"I did not go over the park, but the night is so clear that if your wife were here I should have seen her. There are no hiding-places in the park, no grottoes, no thickets, nothing but lawns and widely spaced trees."

"Where can she have fled, then?"

"She may have glided out by the little gate and have run in the opposite direction, while you were firing the revolver."

"No—let us look together."

"What good would that do? If she is here she won't make her appearance now. She wouldn't dare to go to the main gate, and tell the door-keeper to open it; she has not returned to the side-gate, for I should have met her. Besides, your coachman is with the carriage which brought us here, and he would have seen her if she had gone off in that direction. It will be best, Jean, to return to the chalet where you left that scamp. Finish with him first, and then we shall see what is to be done."

"I consent, for Rascaillon may escape."

To prevent Aubijoux from changing his mind, Le Pailleur took his arm and led him towards the chalet. The window was open, and they looked in to see if Rascaillon was still there. He had disappeared.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Jacques, "I remember now that I forgot to close the gate we came in by."

"How was that? Then all is lost!"

"I was watching it, and should not have stirred if you had not called me. Come quickly! the coachman will tell us if he has seen any one pass."

They soon learned what they wished to know. The coachman declared that the gentleman who had been in the brougham with M. Aubijoux had gone off some minutes already. The servant knew nothing of what was going on, had received no orders, and, besides he would not have abandoned his horses to stop Rangouze. He could not be taken to task and so nothing was said to him. Le Pailleur took his old friend back to the chalet, where everything had so fatally resulted.

The lamps were still burning, illuminating the table on which M. Aubijoux had laid paper and pens ready for Rangouze's written confession. The scoundrel had taken good care not to confess, but he had left a few lines as a farewell.

"If you allow yourself to say a single word to injure me," read Louis d'Estelan's protector, "I will publish everywhere that I was present when

you caught your wife with her lover. I know who he is ; I can tell you his name if you wish to know it. But between us, henceforth, there is war. Well, then, attack me if you dare ! I have arms against you now, and I shall use them to defend myself. It would be better to make a treaty of peace. Do as you please. I await your propositions."

" Does the vile rascal think that I would treat with him ? Never !" exclaimed M. Aubijoux. " What do I care what he saw ? There will be no laughing at me when I have driven away the infamous creature who has deceived me and sent a bullet through her lover's head, for I shall not need Rascaillon to find him. No treaty will I make with a robber and usurer, none ! He won't fly from Paris to-night, and I will denounce him to-morrow. He will be arrested or called upon to defend himself. I will do justice to Estelan, whom I have not seen for ten days. I should have liked to spare him the necessity of appearing before the magistrate, but I cannot do so now. However, he will come out of all this as white as snow. Justice won't make a second mistake. But, before aught else, I will revenge myself."

" Jean," said Le Pailleur, grasping both his hands, " you know that I care as much for your honour as I do for my own. Will you leave it to me to punish the guilty and save Estelan ? I swear to you that you will afterwards thank me for having taken up your cause, and your friend's as well."

" What do you intend to do ?"

" I will tell you to-morrow morning. The plan is clear in my mind, and I will explain it to you when you are calmer."

Aubijoux did not reply. He let himself fall into a chair and hid his face in his hands. The brave-hearted man, so cruelly wounded by a frivolous woman, was weeping bitterly.

XI.

" NEVER sell the bearskin until you have killed the bear," is a specimen of the " wisdom of nations." La Fontaine has a fable on the same subject. Antonia had forgotten it, however, for, on the evening of the first performance of " Zairette," she had—expecting a stupendous success—invited her manager, some singers, and several of her friends of both sexes to sup with her.

The Grasshopper's apartments were situated on the first floor of a house in the Avenue de Messine. She was a careless creature, born with the same instincts as those reckless young men of good family who squander their fortunes without heed of the morrow. She paid six thousand francs rent, and could have given some very elegant entertainments in her two drawing-rooms hung with gilded mirrors. In her dining-room, moreover, a well-served dinner would have made a goodly show ; for there were pillars upholding the ceiling, carpets of antique design, and pictures by good painters. Japanese vases decorated the vestibule, and old Rouen ware was fastened here and there to the walls. Unfortunately the Grasshopper had never known how to organise what is called a regular establishment, for her coachman plundered her in oats, her maid in matters pertaining to her wardrobe, and her cook in the market-money.

The famous "first-night" supper had been ordered at Potel & Chabot's,

and had been talked about for a month. It had been at first ordered for ten guests, intimate friends, but as Antonia invited almost every one whom she met, the list swelled to twenty-five; and when the curtain rose on the first act of "*Zairette*" no one could guess how many people might turn up. Rosine was among the first invited, and was allowed to bring whom she chose. The authors, with Méteil at the head, had their seats by rights; while Escandecat, Zélie, and a light tenor, who sung the lover's lines in the new operetta, having all been in the struggle, so to speak, were necessarily looked for, after what it was hoped would be a victory, together with the friends of past days, such as Busserolles, Girac, Ranguze, and others. On the stage, between two acts, the goddess had also coaxed Souscarrière to come, with Don Manoil the Brazilian, who had gone behind the scenes expressly to congratulate her upon her fine talents.

There was no one but Guy de Bautru whom she had not invited among her acquaintance, and he for a month past had fled from gay companions. No one saw anything of him. He was "settling down." There was a rumour that he was going to be married. "A man overboard," remarked Rosine on hearing of this, and now no one asked anything further about him.

Souscarrière's interview with Pruneaux had been an animated one. They had met face to face in the slips, and the notary, who was thus transgressing propriety, had tried to put a good face on a bad situation. He plunged boldly into confessions, but without telling the full extent of his folly. He confided to the count's friend that he was deeply in love with the Grasshopper, and that the young singer received him kindly. Still, he treated this weakness as unimportant, and asked Souscarrière to say nothing about it.

As for the repayment of M. de Mangars' funds, Pruneaux declared that it would be effected without fail on the following Tuesday, as agreed upon, and spoke of giving back the six hundred thousand francs with as much assurance as though he had already received the money himself. He believed in the fidelity of Antonia and in the promises of Guénégaud, who was to give him the capitalist's reply on the morrow.

Souscarrière, half satisfied, thought the place a bad one for further explanation, and Pruneaux only asked for three days. It seemed better to wait, and as the ex-colonel had no mission to preach to dissipated lawyers, he did not see fit to take Pruneaux to task about his connection with the singer. He promised himself, however, to learn the full extent of Pruneaux's recklessness, somehow or other. Antonia had invited him to her little entertainment, and she was not a woman to keep a secret. He thought that with the assistance of the champagne he might get some useful information out of her, and so he did not refuse her invitation.

After having repeated to the notary that he would call at his office on the day mentioned at nine o'clock in the morning precisely, Souscarrière returned to the stalls. He found his nephew there, told him the results of his attempt, and his plans for the night. Bautru was not in the least amused by the operetta, and the Grasshopper's singing made him nervous. Excited by the mocking smiles of some malevolent rivals who were present, and troubled by the murmurs of dissatisfaction, mingled with hisses, she scaled the heights of the most perilous gamuts and fairly made her friends' flesh creep.

The second act was badly sung and acted, but it ended without any absolute catastrophe, and the uncle and nephew then left the theatre.

"What music!" exclaimed Bautru, "it fairly made my ears bleed."

"I think that Pruneaux must be deaf to be in love with a siren who sings so badly," said Souscarrière, "but I am not so anxious as I was about the money. I shall perhaps go to Vésinet to-morrow to dine. If you see Maugars before I do, you must tell him that all is going on well, and that he can telegraph to my agent to conclude the purchase. The money will be in hand next week. We will go to La Bretèche in a week's time, and Maugars can take possession of his estate, as he pays cash down for it. Estelan must be dead, for your friend, the journalist, confirms the statement. All the good luck comes at once."

"Yes," replied Bautru, delightedly, as his uncle bade him good-bye, saying that he was going to Antonia's supper.

They parted, the uncle striding away, and both vanished just as Pruneaux crept timidly out of the groups of people assembled in front of the theatre. He had gone through indescribable suffering since the commencement of the performance. Souscarrière's very unexpected visit had disturbed him greatly, but the urgent demands of the terrible representative of his principal creditor had made him less wretched than the failure of the operetta in which all the loss came upon himself.

Pruneaux did not doubt but what he would have a favourable answer from the money-lender on the morrow, but he was beginning to doubt the success of "*Zairctte*." If the unappreciated masterpiece failed, the financial future of the *Fantaisies Comiques*, and the musical future of his beloved Grasshopper, were settled, but in the wrong way. And Pruneaux was now asking himself, with absolute anguish, whether the evening would bring triumph or failure.

Upon the stage opinions varied, Antonia taking the sharpest sounds uttered among the audience for applause. Escandecat boldly maintained that the great *trio* in the third act would carry the public away, and that there was no need of troubling one's self as to the manifestations of some evil-intentioned spectators. But the tenor, who was a favourite at Montauban, insinuated that he was the only one in the company who knew how to sing in tune. Métélo declared that the music killed the words, and the *flûtrantes* did not hesitate to say that the public were calling for Azor.

Pruneaux, to end his uncertainties and his sufferings, resolved to go among the people who had the deciding of the matter. He was aware that many of his acquaintances were present, and he supposed that they would go outside to take the air. He did not wish to enter the auditorium, but there was nothing to hinder him from passing, as if by chance, along the street in front of the theatre and mingling with the crowd where he could hear what was being said. Moreover, if he met any friend he could ask, with an air of indifference, what the general opinion was of the operetta and the singers. So he went stealthily out by a back door, walked hastily round the block of buildings, in the centre of which an adventurous speculator had built the *Fantaisies Comiques*, and then approached the front of the theatre. This was a bad move. Souscarrière and Bautru had just gone off. Busserolles and Rangouze were taking part in strange adventures. Métélo had remained behind the scenes, and Girac, who had the dyspepsia, was dozing uneasily in his stall. So none of the men whom he might have asked for support were there, and in addition to all this the unlucky lover caught ill-omened words from the lips of unknown spectators.

"What a *sell*, my friends!" said one.

"It's *down to zero*," said another.

"I shall stay till the end," said a third, "for they will break the benches and throw roasted apples at the actors, and then it will be awfully funny!"

These words were so many dagger-thrusts for Pruneaux. One fellow actually cried out: "That Antonia! what a voice! like a baby's rattle!"

This was too much. The notary fled, but he was not at the end of his sorrows, for he almost fell into the arms of an individual who said to him in tipsy tones: "Ah, it's you, my dear sir; how lucky! I had something to tell you. Don't you remember me? I am Marius Guénégaud, from the Rue des Vinaigriers."

"Excuse me, sir," stammered the notary, "I expected so little to see you."

"Oh, no matter," exclaimed Rangouze's clerk, "it is by a mere chance that I'm here. I don't often come this way. But I treated myself to a regular feast at Hill's restaurant. It is very near here, so I thought I would come and hear a singer, of whom I had heard so much talk, scramble up and down the scales. It's a perfect fraud! And she's so thin, that Antonia! I don't admire any women but fat blondes. Besides, she sings like a creaky wheel."

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted Pruneaux, who would have liked to strangle Marius, "but you said that you had something to tell me."

"Yes, so I have. Come over here! We don't wish to be overheard."

When they reached the opposite side of the street, Guénégaud resumed in a condoling voice: "I am very sorry, sir; but you need not take the trouble to call to-morrow. My employer told me that the affair did not suit him."

The blow was so terrible that Pruneaux was obliged to catch at the shutters of a shop, in order to keep himself from falling.

"Oh," added the clerk, obligingly, "it isn't because he heard anything to your disadvantage, but he hasn't got the six hundred thousand francs by him. All his money is lent out."

"I could manage with part of the sum," stammered the notary. The only hope which he had clung to had failed him.

"Bah! you can borrow it of some one else," said Guénégaud. "But I can't find it for you. I am tired of the business, and I have left my employer."

"You might at least give me his address."

"That is forbidden. Ask Monsieur de Rangouze for it, if you like, and allow me to leave you! The third act is about to begin, and I do not wish to lose my part in the breaking up. I have a big key to whistle with. Good-bye, my dear sir, good luck to you. A Paris notary can't be put out for six hundred thousand paltry francs; of course not!" With this conclusion, the scamp turned upon his heel.

Pruneaux, who was in consternation, went away, staggering like a drunken man. He was quite cured of his foolish hopes, and the situation began to appear to him in all its real horror. The abyss yawned at his feet, but one step more and he would be cast into it. It no longer depended upon him to avoid it. "All is lost," he muttered—"all is over! In three days all Paris will know that I have spent my clients' money. My disgrace will be public. I ought to have known that this usurer wouldn't come up to the mark, and now all I can do is to blow out my brains. But, no," he resumed, "no, I will not kill myself, for all is not lost. I have still Antonia!"

Comforted by this idea, Prunevaux raised his head once more and resumed his way to the stage door. "I still have Antonia, and she loves me, whatever the dandies may think," said the bewitched man to himself. "They imagine that a man must be twenty-five to please a woman, but she loves me and has sworn it a thousand times. It isn't a mere caprice, but a sincere attachment. She has a heart of gold, and won't desert me on account of evil fortune. She will be rewarded for her devotion, for she will find abroad the success which these fools of Parisians refuse her. I shall ask her to-night to come to a final resolution, for we haven't a moment to lose."

The notary still hugged his ridiculous illusions to his heart. He was over forty, had a corpulent form, a red face, and a mind as dull as his body was heavy. But he believed himself to be adored by a woman many years younger than himself. He had kept a hundred notes of a thousand francs each, with which to tempt her to go abroad with him and try her fortune in another country. He did not doubt her consent. He still hoped, in spite of all, that "*Zairette*" might not prove a total failure, that the *Fantaisies Comiques* might still bring in some money. But there was no more time to wait now. Even if the operetta succeeded, the enterprise could not yield him the half million which he needed in three days, and he almost hoped that his dear Grasshopper might meet with defeat, lest a triumph should tempt her to remain in Paris.

These thoughts filled his mind until he reached the stage door. He felt a hesitation which he had in no wise experienced three hours before, when he had passed through the same portal bound for the manager's little box. Now, however, the idea of approaching the stage filled him with something approaching terror. He feared lest he should arrive just in time to hear that concert of hisses which the low-bred Guénégaud had told him was coming, and he had not courage to endure it. What kind of a face would he wear if his idol were hooted? He could already see Antonia angry, Escandecat dejected, Métel sneering, and Souscarrière towering above them all. The colonel was always before his mind now, like Banquo's ghost before Macbeth's terrified gaze. If the evening ended in a disaster he would learn it all too soon, and so he preferred not to be present.

He was not invited to the Grasshopper's supper, because of his legal position, for it was not thought proper for a notary to sup with singers, but he had his habitual chats with Antonia in a little boudoir, where he now thought of repairing instead of returning to the private box. "I shan't prevent her receiving her guests," he said to himself, "for I won't show myself, and it is indispensable that they should be received. I will go into the boudoir, she will join me there, and I will tell her all."

With this grand resolve, Prunevaux turned sadly away from the stage-door, which now seemed like the gate of "*Paradise Lost*," and turned towards the Avenue de Messine. The walk was by no means a short one, and he did not progress very rapidly, for he was stout and the weight of care made his steps lag.

The windows of the suite of rooms where his goddess resided were blazing with light, and the pneumatical clock in front of the house indicated midnight upon its blue dial when he reached the door. Two or three victorias and hired cabs were stationed outside, and so was Antonia's brougham. It was evident then that she had returned and brought some of her guests with her. How had the performances come to so abrupt an

end? Theatrical performances usually end later in Paris, especially on "first nights. This early breaking up was ominous, and the notary feared that "Zairette" had ended in a catastrophe.

He rang timidly and passed before the door-keeper's lodge with the collar of his summer overcoat drawn up. Formerly, it was with a delicious palpitation of the heart that he had glided through the vestibule, but now his heart beat with anything but joy.

The maid opened the door for him, and exclaimed: "My mistress is in a dreadful humour; but if you will come in, sir, she may have time to see you before going to table."

He entered the boudoir and Antonia soon appeared, her face dark and sad. "Why did you leave before the third act?" she asked. "Was it because you knew that the storm was about to break forth? You left me just when I needed to be sustained. Is that your affection?"

"What 'storm' do you speak of? Did the performance end badly?"

"It did not end at all. The audience howled so loudly that the curtain had to be lowered on the fourth scene. It was a conspiracy, my dear, a frightful conspiracy! Escandecat recognised two country managers who are jealous of him, and who have got up this cabal to play him a trick."

"That is very mean and paltry, but they won't be there another night, and the second performance will go off better."

"The second? There will never be a second. Do you think that I would sing to such brutes again? Escandecat says he never saw so stupid an audience."

"But how about the theatre?"

"It will have to be shut up, that's all! The season is bad, anyhow. There would not be fifty francs made in three nights."

"It has cost me three hundred thousand."

"The loss won't kill you. Besides, you never imagined, I suppose, that theatres could be hired and operettas got up with nothing but nutshells? But never mind that! What do you want to tell me? Say it quickly, for I am in no humour to talk of business matters. I want to forget what has happened to-night. Ah! the wretches! how they hissed! What a beggarly set! I should like to recognise one of them and drive over him with my victoria!"

Pruneaux was in no hurry to reply. He was pale, and his contracted features showed that he was suffering. Antonia was not really bad-hearted, and her admirer's grief affected her.

"Come now, Arthur," she said, changing her manner, "what is the matter? Tell me what ails you? Any one would think that you were going to be hanged. Is it because I have failed to-night that you look like that? Are you so very fond of me?"

"You would not ask me that," replied the notary, "if you knew what I have done for your sake."

"I do know, and I beg you to believe that I shall never forget it. Say no more now, for I want to be calm and composed when my guests arrive. What a pity that you are a notary! I might take you in and you would enjoy the supper very much. The little tenor is very funny when he imitates people. But don't be down-hearted; you are rich, and have many ways of consoling yourself besides drinking with a lot of singers."

"I am not rich any longer," sighed Pruneaux.

"What nonsense!" exclaimed the Grasshopper.

"It is not nonsense. I am ruined."

"That can't be. Rosine was saying only yesterday that with your place as a notary you had a hundred and fifty thousand francs' income, without mentioning a million which you will inherit later on."

"The sale of my practice would not suffice to pay my creditors."

"You have creditors, like a mere law-student? Well, that's *stylish!* Rosine won't say any more that you are not a man of fashion. Now, I thought that you were a very steady sort of person. But how did you manage to ruin yourself? Who do you owe money to?"

"To clients, who entrusted their funds to me."

"Then you have really committed a criminal act?"

"Yes, for your sake," replied the notary, in a hoarse voice.

"Listen to me," said Antonia, with unfeigned emotion. "I did not think that you would go so far as that. Had I known it, I should not have allowed you to risk this money for me. It is partly your fault. You rushed on very fast. You did not wait for me to ask you. Now, I need to be restrained in expenditure, and if I am not I do foolish things. I thought that a notary's money must be inexhaustible. I thought that you could make this venture which has proved a failure. Well, it will serve me as a lesson, but I shan't forget that all this was for my sake. Take what I have, and try to recover yourself. I have ten thousand francs of my own."

"You don't understand—"

"Take my jewellery, too, if you like. With ten thousand francs you may be able to live a year abroad, and then you can come back again. You are able and energetic, and you can buy an agency in Brussels or Geneva. It is bad to come to that when one has been a notary in Paris, but, after all, anything that makes money is good as a business. You will make another fortune, and even then you won't be too old to enjoy life."

"I am too old to love again."

"Is that true? Will you never love any one but me? Well, never mind where you have to go, I will go to see you. When must you leave Paris?"

"In three days' time."

"Then I will go to the railway station with you, and to-morrow morning I will give you the money I speak of."

"I thank you for your kind intentions, my love, but I don't need the money. I have a hundred thousand francs with me."

"With that you can get on anywhere."

"Even with some one else with me."

"Some one else? Who else?"

"Listen to me, Antonia," said Pruneaux, whose voice shook with emotion, "you know that it is impossible for me to live without you, and you have just assured me of your love. You won't refuse to go with me, then?"

"Where are you going?"

"Wherever you like. We will go to Russia, to America, to countries where your talent will be appreciated, and where you will have immense success as a singer."

"Do you think so? I don't. The papers would say that I had been hissed at the Fantaisies Comiques, and papers go everywhere. That would injure me with the foreign managers. No, I prefer to try to get an engagement at the Bouffes or the Renaissance."

"Oh ! you can get one," said Prunevaux, bitterly, "and I can go and die of despair, far, far from here."

"Nonsense ! didn't I tell you that I should go to visit you ? Come, my friend, be reasonable ! How can I go with you ? I should be in your way and prevent you from succeeding. A man alone can always get on when he has some brains, and you have plenty ; but with a woman he can't do so. So now——"

The Grasshopper was about to end with a decided refusal, when her maid appeared at the door, and said : "They are waiting for you, madame. All the gentlemen have come, and the head-waiter wishes to know if he shall send up supper."

"I am coming," replied Antonia.

When the maid had closed the door she walked up to Prunevaux, who was looking very downcast, and placing both hands upon his shoulders, she said : "Do you know what you ought to do ? You ought to come in to supper."

"I don't feel like it," sighed Prunevaux.

"Neither do I. I need a great deal of courage to swallow a glass of champagne after what has happened this evening. It was a downfall like pitching from the top of the Tour Saint-Jacques, and then you tell me this dreadful trouble of your own. There is no future for me as a singer. You, too, are ruined, but do I weep or whine ? No ; I want to laugh and sing, if only to show my guests that I don't care for the fools who hissed me. Do as I do, my dear ! Make headway against the storm ! Come to supper, and sing at dessert. That will show that you are a man, a true man, and to-morrow morning, when we are alone—for you must come back—we will talk over our plans. I am not obstinate, and if you succeed in proving that it won't be a bad thing for you if we both go abroad, why then——"

"You will consent to go with me ?" exclaimed Prunevaux. "Ah, could I but hope it ! Who are the guests who are here ?"

"Zélie, of course. Rosine—she would come, though I did not want her ; but she would have had a grudge against me if I had not invited her. There are a couple of foreign ladies with her."

"But who are the gentlemen ?"

"Métel, who wrote part of the piece ; the fellows who helped him haven't yet come, nor the two composers of the music, but I don't care for them, for they have bad manners. I asked the tenor, because, although he is rather too free and easy, he is very amusing. Escandecat is in there too."

"He will begin talking about the performance."

"No. I will give him some wine, and he will be tipsy before the first course is over. Girae must be so already."

"Is that all ?"

"Oh, I forgot the best of all ! A Brazilian who has just arrived in Paris, and who plays heavily. I shall make him play, and I should laugh if he lost."

"Is he young ?" timidly asked the lawyer, who divined a future rival in this foreign personage.

"I don't know. He was introduced to me on the stage, and I scarcely looked at him. He is just like Rastacour in the play. Those Americans' faces are all alike. I must amuse myself by having him taken in hand by an original whom I have invited, and who does not look accommodating at all. He is a kind of carabineer, about six feet high—but, now I think of it, you know him—you were talking to him during the performance."

" Monsieur Souscarrière ? "

" Yes : Guy de Bautru's uncle."

" Then I can't go in to your supper."

" Why not ? Don't you like him ? "

" He is the Comte de Maugars' friend. I owe the count six hundred thousand francs, and Souscarrière has asked me for them. He has been persecuting me for the last week on the matter—he has his suspicions—and if he saw me here——"

" I understand, he might make a scene. I return, then, to my first idea. Go into the dressing-room. I will send some refreshments to you, and if you like to take a nap there is a divan."

" I have not slept for many a night," muttered Pruneaux.

" Well, then, you can think of me."

" And may I hope that to-morrow——"

" We will breakfast together, and talk seriously of our journey. I say neither yes nor no."

Pruneaux was obliged to be satisfied with this arrangement, and he kissed his beloved, while she took a look at herself in the glass, to make sure that there was no change in her face.

Antonia then went to join her guests with a smile on her lips. The habit of being upon the stage enabled her to show a good face, although she really was very humiliated. She was sincerely sorry for Pruneaux's misfortunes, but the notary was not in the drawing-room, and she did not think any more of him than of the first admirer she had ever had. Her guests welcomed her with general acclamation, and the facetious tenor thought himself very witty as he imitated a drum by beating on his nose and breathing hard. There was no one there with whom Souscarrière, who was present, was acquainted, except Méteil and Girac, and he was talking with them. The Brazilian, who liked singers, was talking with the two who were in the room, but when the Grasshopper appeared the groups mingled. She had found time to change her dress and put on diamonds enough to make Rosine's foreign lady friends look positively cross-eyed. Her sparkling, animated beauty showed naught of the emotions of the evening. She looked well, and appeared to be in good spirits.

" Welcome, colonel," she exclaimed, extending both hands to Souscarrière. " You do not desert your friends in misfortune. You have come, although Busserolles and Rangonze have deserted me."

" What misfortune has happened to you, mademoiselle ? " asked Bautru's uncle.

" The misfortune of being hissed, if you please—and you know that very well."

" No, I did not. I was not there at the end."

" You were wise to go away. The piece was idiotic. I beg your pardon, my good Méteil ! "

" Oh ! you may say anything you like about it," replied the journalist. " I had so little to do with it ! "

" It was written by two clever men, who will have their revenge some other time," said Rosine, sneeringly. " Everybody knows that," she added. " Now, let us drop the subject and take our supper."

" By all means !" said Escandecat and the tenor from Montanban, who felt inclined to drown their sorrows in the flowing bowl.

" You, too, Don Manoël," resumed Antonia, addressing the Brazilian,

"you remain faithful to ill-treated artistes. I am greatly obliged to you, and shall not forget your kindness."

The Brazilian was attempting a well-turned compliment when the folding-doors of the dining-room were thrown wide open. The Grasshopper passed her left arm under Don Manoël's and her right under Souscarrière's, for she wished to please the colonel in Pruneaux's interest. Rosine fastened herself upon Métel, her friends let themselves be led in by the singers, and Zélie fell to Girac's care.

The supper was like all those that are furnished by a regular caterer. The white ties of the whiskered waiters, the usual bill of fare, with the usual wines, all was the same as it always is. But the silver was marked with the initials of the mistress of the house, an A and an M, for she was unfortunately burdened with the ridiculous name of Moucheron.

Souscarrière congratulated her upon the handsome appearance of the supper-table, while the marsala and salmon, with shrimp sauce, were being served. He hoped to induce her to talk about Pruneaux. Antonia, who was not wanting in discernment, replied in such a way as to mislead him.

"I may be obliged some day to eat in Criel china, with ruolz knives and forks. Did you hear that it was a Dutch burgomaster who hired that theatre for me? When he hears that I have not succeeded he will be in a towering rage."

"No danger," replied Souscarrière, politely. "But why didn't the Batavian come to hear you sing?"

"He would have liked to do so, but I wrote to him that his presence in the theatre would only put me out and injure my voice, and so he resigned himself to remaining in the Netherlands."

"Did you know that Pruneaux, the notary, was one of your admirers? I saw him in the slips this evening, and he confessed that he thought you charming."

"For mercy's sake, hold your tongue! A notary! What would people say? Besides, he is very steady, and I have entrusted him with a little money of mine, which obliges me to see him sometimes."

This was said so naturally that Guy's uncle made no reply. The Tour Blanche and Château Margaux were served, and he helped himself to both, besides asking twice for some of the fillet of beef with artichokes.

"I was wrong," he thought; "Pruneaux will pay up all right. And as soon as we leave table I shall go home to bed. The wine isn't bad, but the company is not my style."

Antonia was already listening to the gallant remarks of her neighbour on the left. "Madame," said the Brazilian, who had not heard more than the first words of the dialogue, "I am not from Holland, but I beg you to believe that South America is entirely at your service."

The jokes which followed as to the diamond mines in that country were lost amid the noisy exclamations of the remaining guests. The singers had already taken a good deal of wine, especially Escandecat, who was low-spirited. The tenor, seated between Rosine's two friends, was indulging in sentimental tirades with the Hungarian lady, and declarations of love with the Italian. Girae was quizzing Zélie, who was out of humour, and Métel talked scandal with Rosine. Souscarrière, on whose right sat a handsome young girl, who had been playing the part of the "Sultana of Cathay," tried, in order to entertain himself, to compliment her a little, but as he soon found out that she was extremely stupid, he began to drink

Chambertin and eat Milanese *timbale*. He had not made the discoveries which he wished to make, and he felt sleepy. The conversation soon grew louder, and when Moët's *Brut Impérial* was poured out no one could hear himself speak. The owner of the La Bretèche succeeded, however, in catching a few words which Rosine addressed to Méteil.

"Is it true that Bautru is going to be married?" she asked, taking care to speak very loud so that her words might be overheard.

"People say so, but I don't believe it," said Méteil.

"I hope that he won't marry the Count de Maugars' daughter, at all events."

"Why not?"

"Because, if she married Bautru she would be committing bigamy. Her husband is as alive as a man can be. He is in Paris, too, hiding away, but he has been seen."

Méteil began to try to prove to his neighbour that she was mistaken, but his eyes met Souscarrière's and he said nothing of the suicide in the Bois.

"I tell you that I met him yesterday at dusk," insisted Rosine, "and he will be arrested some day, see if he isn't."

No one said anything to this. The misfortunes of the Maugars' family did not interest the guests, and Guy's uncle had no desire to discuss the subject with Rosine.

They were now at the dessert, and with the Constance wine the supper grew gayer and gayer. Everybody talked at once except Souscarrière, who passed his time in tasting the wines. Antonia chatted with Don Manoël, and let her guests take care of themselves.

Méteil at last suggested going into the drawing-room to take coffee and play cards. The motion was seconded, for everybody knew that the Brazilian willingly risked large sums at play, and each guest hoped to win something. Even Escandecat hoped to recover from his recent disaster; and Don Manoël, when Antonia suggested gambling to him, announced that he would play as she wished, and left her the choice of the game.

With this, everyone rose and left the table, and Souscarrière asked the Grasshopper's permission to beat a retreat. He declared that he felt tired, and that although he appreciated pretty women, he had given up cards years ago. Antonia at first attempted to detain him, but changed her mind and allowed him to depart, which he did without ceremony.

She had reasons for letting him go in this fashion, for an idea had come into her head. The Brazilian was the kind of man to lose a million in an evening against a player with money enough to hold out against him. Now, Pruevaux had a hundred thousand francs in his pocket. He was in an adjoining room, and taking his supper by himself. Why shouldn't he try his luck, now that Souscarrière was no longer in the way? The other guests would not trouble themselves about him, notary or not.

A portable roulette board was brought in, and Antonia went in search of the notary. While she was persuading him to play, Don Manoël became the centre of attraction, and he took his seat and placed in front of him the famous portfolio which had appeared so often at the club, and which far from growing smaller had considerably increased in bulk. The players were all seated at the table when suddenly Antonia appeared, leading Pruevaux by the hand. His entrance created a sensation. The unlucky man must have imbibed no small amount of the wine sent to his table, for his face was as red as a poppy.

"My children," said the Grasshopper, "here is one of my friends. He

was to have been at our supper, but was detained by professional duties. When he left the theatre he was obliged to go to a client's house to draw up a will. Don Manoël, allow me to introduce Monsieur Prunevaux, one of our Paris notaries, and a dangerous player."

The Brazilian bowed in a manner which seemed to say that he did not consider any player "dangerous."

Escandecat put his handkerchief to his face to disguise his emotion, for he imagined that this might be the person interested in the theatrical venture, and he was alarmed by his presence.

"That 'white tie' has a way of acting that fills me with amazement," muttered Métel.

The young ladies present were dividing the ivory counters which they hoped to turn into money, and did not disturb themselves to look at Prunevaux.

Rosine, however, darted at him. "Are you crazy?" said she, "to come here to play cards? Girac will speak about it at the club, Métel will put it in his paper, and the singers will laugh about it wherever they go. This is no place for you, and I advise you to go away."

"No, no," stammered the notary. "These gentlemen will say nothing, and I want to amuse myself to-night."

"Very well, but I see that you are rushing to ruin, and I don't wish to lose the money which I placed in your hands. I have only had a part of it back, and you still have ten thousand francs which I was fool enough to hand you last month to buy a first mortgage. Give them to me!"

"Willingly. You have only to call at my office to-morrow morning."

"There is nothing to show that I should find you there if I did. I want my money now!"

"But, my dear friend, I have not got it now."

"Don't tell me that! If you had not got it you wouldn't come in just at the moment when they are going to play roulette. Pay up at once or I will make a scandalous scene here!"

She would not have hesitated to do so, and Prunevaux, who knew her well, saw that he must yield. He took out his portfolio and gave a package of ten bank-notes to his terrible client, who put it in her pocket, saying: "I will send you a receipt to-morrow. Go and play now. The Brazilian is waiting for you, but if the Chamber of Notaries obliges you to give up your office, remember that I warned you beforehand."

The game had already begun. The ivory ball rolled into the groove of the cylinder, and Don Manoël brandished his rake in the air. The players sat closer to one another in order to make room for Prunevaux, who placed himself between Métel and Zélie.

Antonia remained standing. She did not like gambling. Her mother's disastrous course had cured her of any desire to play. The widow Moucheron passed her life with cards in her hands, and the allowance which the Grasshopper made her out of her salary as a singer was lost in pursuing chimerical "martingales." But although Antonia did not play, she was extremely interested in the struggle now beginning.

"You are in luck," said Métel to Prunevaux, who, with some remains of professional dignity, took out his money under the edge of the table, so as not to display the ninety thousand francs which he had about him.

"I don't know, for I never played before," muttered the notary.

"So much the more reason why you should win. I will follow your

inspiration. But I hope that you are not going to play on the numbers. That's only fit for women."

"Women know very well what they are about when they play by the numbers," exclaimed Zélie; "the nine is out, and I have won. It's true, I see, that a little golden pig hung from one's bracelet brings luck."

The other players had put their money crosswise and on the squares, so that a shower of gold fell upon the counters laid down by them. The Brazilian had produced a few napoleons which were gone at once, and in order that everybody might be pleased luck had favoured even the tenor and Escandecat.

"It may be like that once in a while," said the journalist to Pruneaux. "Come, show that you are really a player! Put three notes of a thousand in the middle—there, right before you on that little square. I, who am not a notary can only put three napoleons. Good, there is the nineteen! We have won!"

Don Manoël smilingly held out six gold napoleons and six thousand francs in notes. Pruneaux could not get over having doubled his venture in so short a time. He already blessed the Grasshopper who had prevailed upon him to try his fortune at cards. She stood in front of him and encouraged him by her glances.

"Now, triumphant notary," exclaimed Métel, "you will oblige me by leaving all your profits on a simple chance; you stake the maximum on the second throw; I hope that this is good enough for anybody—a few more like that last one and you will have won more than the value of your place as a notary. Come, the maximum at miss. I stake too!"

He was still talking when the ball, after a long evolution, fell into the cylinder with a little sharp sound and lodged itself in one of the copper grooves.

"First, red, uneven, and miss," exclaimed Métel, who had risen to read the fiat of fate more quickly. "Six thousand one hundred and twenty to pay, Señor Manoël!"

Pruneaux took his money up with joy which he did not disguise. He began to regret not having played cards from his childhood instead of drawing up contracts. The turn which followed sobered him a little, however. A "zero" came out, which carried off half of the maximum which his neighbour had advised him to put on "miss." He won again, lost again, and then won again. He no longer needed to be advised, and, besides, did not vary his play. The maximum at "miss" was what he still held to, and when he won he raked in his gains, and when he lost he drew supplies from the pile of bank notes upon his knees.

The game continued with varied results. Métel and Girac lost. Escandecat, also, although he did not hesitate to advance or withdraw whatever he ventured, according to circumstances, putting it close to the limit traced on the tablecover. The women won; Rosine, especially, who always played rather high. They did not trouble themselves about Pruneaux. "Each for himself" is the watchword among players. But the banker did not lose sight of the only adversary it was worth his while to notice, and Antonia followed the chances of the battle with interest.

She contented herself with mentally expressing the sincerest wishes for Pruneaux's success. But fortune does not smile often on those who need her most. She had favoured Pruneaux at the outset only to betray him afterwards, for a couple of hours later she fairly turned her back upon him. The larger numbers began to appear in series, and the poor

notary, who stuck to miss, saw his reserve dwindle away very rapidly. He did nothing now but bend down to take notes off his knees under the table.

"Take care, my dear sir," said Rosine, who rose for a heavy venture, "if you continue to go on at this rate nothing will be left you but your brass plate."

"What do I care for my brass plate?" growled the notary, who had completely lost his head.

From this moment all went wrong. Number thirty-six seriously diminished the last bundle of thousand-franc notes, and, as though in mockery, the nineteen finished him, although it had given the now ruined notary his first winning at roulette.

"Red, uneven, and miss!"

These words, uttered in a soft voice by Don Manoël, made Antonia's sadly sobered lover start as though he had heard his death-warrant, for he now understood the jargon of the game. The Brazilian's rake took away his final hope, and Antonia, who had gone to see Rosine off, returned at the moment when the unfortunate man gave up the game. She had no need to question him to know what had happened. His face spoke plainly enough.

"Go and wait for me in the boudoir," she whispered in his ear. He mechanically obeyed her, and no one noticed his pitiable retreat. As long as the struggle lasts the dead are not thought of.

Pruneaux had scarcely strength to drag himself to the boudoir, where he had better have remained all the evening. He entered it and threw himself upon a divan and remained there motionless, without voice or courage. He had not even the strength to shed tears. Twenty minutes afterwards the Grasshopper entered.

"You are angry with me," she said. "You ought not to be so. I gave you bad advice, but I did it with a good motive. You mustn't give way like this now, because you are in a fix! You had better be thinking how to get out of it. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know," said Pruneaux, with a dazed look.

"Can you remain in Paris? No? Well, then, you must go."

"Where shall I go, now that I have nothing left?"

"No matter where. You have the five hundred louis which I offered you, and which you won't insult me by refusing. That is enough to enable you to wait a while. I will endeavour to quiet your creditors by reasoning with them, even the Count de Mangars. I think that the colonel will listen to what I shall say on the subject. He won't refuse to listen to me if I ask him to prevent any complaint being made against you. All that won't give you back what you have lost. When you return you cannot set up as flawless and perfect, you know; but if you remain you would be in a terrible plight. So then, my friend, be off without losing a moment! By the evening, all Paris will know the story of your overthrow at roulette. It is four o'clock. There must be trains which leave for Brussels or London at six. You need not take any baggage, and I have time to change my dress to go with you to the railway-station. You will be safe before any one asks you to account for yourself."

The unfortunate notary did not yield without some difficulty. He tried to set aside arguments which could not be refuted; he rebelled against the idea of accepting the Grasshopper's generous offer, but, at

last, he was obliged to yield to her pitiless logic and to submit to the humiliation of placing the bank notes in his pocket. She had the delicacy not to offer the money until they reached the station, and then she forced it into his hands. He had no will any longer, and suffered her to do as she wished. After an affectionate farewell the ill-matched lovers parted. Pruneaux went away with a broken heart.

Souscarrière, however, had reached home well pleased with his evening. He had delightful dreams while the notary was being ruined, for he thought that he had got Maugars' money back, and that Madeleine had married his nephew.

XII.

THE colonel was extremely fond of his nephew, and if he had consented to prolong his stay in Paris it was only on Guy's account. He was not, however, so countrified as not to appreciate the boulevards. He had led a truly Parisian life at one time, during the ten years which had elapsed between his return from Africa and his settling down at La Bretèche. He was beginning to like it again, but he did not look upon it as he had formerly done. Noisy card parties, dinners with gay company, and bachelor's breakfasts no longer pleased him. Theatricals bored him, and the attempt which he had made to stay out the performance of the operetta had not encouraged him to begin again. He was not tempted to join any club; still less to go to the balls at Mabille, but he enjoyed riding Guy's horses in the morning and inhaling the fresh air of the Bois de Boulogne with expanding lungs. He drank only water at breakfast, strolled about the courtyard of the Grand Hôtel, where he took his coffee, amid the going and coming of English and American people, listened to the military music in the garden of the Tuilleries, and seated himself, at the hour for drinking the usual decoction of absinthe, in front of some café where he was likely to meet old comrades. He smoked the best cigars, and did not trouble himself for the present about verifying the accounts of his agent, advising his farmers, or overlooking his game-keepers, having left all that behind him in the country.

He fully enjoyed the absolute liberty which is only to be found in Paris, and by those who have money to spend. He might have fancied himself back again, had he chose, at the happy time when, as Lieutenant Souscarrière, he had only thought of enjoying himself. The first days following his arrival had been greatly saddened by the misfortunes of his friend Maugars; but the sky was clearing, all dangers seemed set aside, his nephew's future appeared secure, and he might flatter himself that he had largely contributed to all this success. He had won the right to rest upon his laurels.

The morning after Antonia's entertainment, Souscarrière, reassured as to Pruneaux's solvability, resolved to give himself a full day's holiday, a day which he would pass as best suited himself. The Vésinet lovers could get along without him, and Guy had undertaken to carry M. de Maugars the good news furnished by Méteil, who stated that Estelan's death was about to be officially recorded.

Accordingly Souscarrière rose considerably later than usual, went to the Hammam to take a Turkish bath, made a full breakfast at Tortoni's, walked to the Fine Art show in the Champs Elysées, where he hoped to see many a battle-piece, and found but few, returned on foot at five

o'clock, and took up his position outside the *Café de la Paix* to rest himself while looking at the passers-by.

This amusement, dear to country people, was one which he greatly liked. The promenaders on the boulevard did not resemble those whom he had seen in his youth, and he knew no one among the crowd of foreigners and seedy-looking men who moved perpetually up and down the sidewalk. But he liked to exercise his sagacity in guessing by their faces and dress to what social category they belonged. He was often mistaken, for prefects, now-a-days, often look like billiard-markers, and magistrates resemble the bailiffs of small market-towns; but he recognised, twenty paces off, all the old officers or soldiers, and knew at once who were the real ladies among the women of all sorts who passed before his eyes.

He was enjoying this innocent pleasure when a little brougham coming from the direction of the Madeleine drew up short, there being several vehicles in the way. The horse was a good one of pure breed and caught Souscarrière's eye, and while he was examining it with a knowing look, a woman's profile appeared at the door window. The ex-Chasseur d'Afrique took no notice of this, and continued to examine the shape and action of the animal, when all at once he saw the coachman turn round to take an order from his mistress and then turn the bay to the left. The carriage drew up to the sidewalk and the woman's face appeared again; and this time she made signs to the colonel. She nodded most familiarly to him, beckoning him at the same time.

Souscarrière at first thought that she was mistaken and took him for some one else, or that the invitation was intended for a handsome young man who was drinking vermouth beside him, for he did not recognise the lady, and had not the vanity to suppose that some one had fallen in love with him while he was drinking his absinthe.

But the beckoning now became so energetic that he could not mistake it. It was really he whom the lady was summoning, and as he wished to be polite under all circumstances, he rose and walked towards the carriage.

"What! is it you?" he exclaimed, as he recognised Antonia. "I am inexcusable for making you wait. I do not know what I could have been thinking of. Your charming face is not one of those that can be forgotten; but I hardly thought that after leaving you so late at a gay supper you would be here at an hour when many pretty women are still asleep—"

"No, it isn't that," said Antonia, with a pout which was very becoming. "You did not recognise me because I am dreadfully altered. Admit that I look very ugly."

"I'll perish first! I proclaim, on the contrary, that you ought to go at once and sit for your portrait. A little pale, perhaps, but what of that? Those 'after-supper' looks are very becoming."

"You may laugh if you like, but I cried till daybreak. And what I have to tell you is no laughing matter, I can assure you."

"What is it?" asked Souscarrière with some suspicion.

"Pruneaux has gone off."

"Gone off?"

"Yes, he has fled to England. He has spent his clients' money, and he owes more than a million."

"Who told you this?"

"He did. He came to see me after you had gone away, and confessed everything."

"And you let him go! Did you help him off?"

"No, but I went with him to the railway station. If I had not lent him a little money he could not have paid his fare. Do you call that helping him? Pruneaux helped me to make my *débit*. It failed, but the kindness was none the less. It was not for me to denounce him. Besides, had I been capable of such a thing, what good would it have done? He does not take a penny of his clients' money with him."

"Do you expect to make me pity the miserable wretch?" exclaimed Souscarrière, furiously. "Do you know that he has stolen six hundred thousand francs from one of my friends?"

"From the Count de Maugars? Yes, I know that. I know it so well that I promised him to sell a part of what remains to me and pay it back, for I owe it to Pruneaux on account of what he invested in the operetta for my sake."

"What nonsense is this? The Count de Maugars would not touch your money. But I'll catch this rascal, and if he does not pay up I'll thrash him!"

However, Souscarrière now paused, for he remembered that his anger could not justly be turned on the Grasshopper, and the reproaches he uttered would do no good.

"The proof that I am interested in you and your friend," resumed Antonia, "is that I warn you in order that you may form your plans at once. To-morrow everybody will know that Pruneaux has made off. At present no one but his head clerk knows it."

"You are right," replied Souscarrière. "I will say good day, then," and he left her without further ceremony.

The office of the faithless notary was in the Chaussee d'Antin near the Café de la Paix. Without taking any further notice of Antonia, Souscarrière threw some money to the waiter at the café and went off in the direction of Pruneaux's place of business. He still hoped that the Grasshopper had exaggerated the evil, but his interview with the head clerk deprived him of his last illusion. The clerk confessed, with a downcast look, that his employer had left a letter which removed all doubt as to the reality of the catastrophe. The disaster was all that it had been represented to be. Pruneaux had squandered every copper he could lay his hands upon, and had nothing left, even of his personal property. As for the numerous creditors, the clerk could hold out no hope. Souscarrière went off in complete despair, and thought that his best course was to inform Maugars at once of what had happened.

"When I think that I am partly the cause of this, it seems as though I should go mad!" he said to himself, "for had I more vigorously insisted upon some satisfaction from this miserable notary I might have forced him to give up something at least. If I had but six hundred thousand francs at my disposal, I swear that I would take them to Maugars and let him think that I received them from Pruneaux. But I have not got them, and, besides, he will see by the papers that his scamp of a notary has absconded. Well, I will sell La Bretèche and give the money to Maugars, for I consider myself responsible for what has happened to him. He will refuse, but I shall force him to accept it by managing some other way. He cannot prevent me from giving my fortune to my nephew, by a will made at once, and as Guy will marry his daughter in a year's time the evil will be almost repaired."

These reflections filled the colonel's mind till he reached the Place du Havre. He intended to take the first train that started. He knew

that he would find Guy at Vésinet, and this was an additional reason for hastening there, as he wished to talk over the matter of Pruneaux's flight.

But the day was destined to be full of surprises. Just as he reached the arcade, round the courtyard of the station, he saw Maugars approaching him, and was struck by the expression of his face. "He looks very much disturbed," thought Souscarrière, "perhaps he already knows what I have to tell him."

The count caught sight of him and hastened forward. His first words were: "I was going to see you. I wished to tell you of my misfortune, our misfortune, I may say. You thought that I had suffered enough, did you not? That the fatality which hangs over me had done its worst?"

"Alas! only an hour ago I learned that it had not. I know what has happened, and was going to Vésinet to talk over some way of parrying this fresh thrust."

"Some way? There is no way. All is lost! I have only to die, for I am accursed. But who told you?"

"Be calm, my friend. I will try to arrange matters so that you shan't suffer too much by the disappearance of this—"

"What disappearance do you allude to? What are you talking about? I don't understand you, and I see you don't understand me. Estelan is arrested!" added the count, grasping Souscarrière's arm so hard that he almost broke it."

"Estelan arrested!" repeated the ex-colonel. "How can that be? It is impossible! You know very well that he is dead."

"I believed that he was," replied M. de Maugars, bitterly. "I do not believe so now, for I have just received a visit from the detective who already came to me on the day of Madeline's wedding, you remember?—and he told me that Estelan had been in prison since yesterday."

"This is astounding! incomprehensible! I ordered Guy to go and tell you that the certificate of death was about to be made out. I heard it from a man who was told so by one of the upper clerks at the prefecture."

"The police were deceived as well as ourselves. The man who committed suicide in the Bois de Boulogne was not Estelan, and the proof of it is that Estelan was arrested last night by one of the detectives who have been on the watch for him for a month. They recognised him, although he was disguised, and, besides, he did not deny his identity. He allowed himself to be taken to the lockup unresistingly, and afterwards to the dépôt. And what is still more astonishing, he asks to see me."

"And you have consented to see him? and come to Paris to—"

"To consult with you, in the first place. I am not calm, and if you don't help me with your advice I am incapable of coming to any conclusion. I was going to the Grand Hôtel to find you. If I had not met you I don't know but that I should have thrown myself into the Seine."

"Fortunately, I am here," replied Souscarrière. He felt as deeply as his friend the blow which had come upon them all, but he did not lose his composure, for he realised that it was not the moment to overwhelm the Count de Maugars by telling him of Pruneaux's flight. "Let us go into this restaurant," he said, and he pointed to one near the station. "We can take a private room, and we shan't be disturbed there."

"I don't feel like dining," exclaimed Madeline's father, with a gesture of protest.

"My dear friend, you must dine if you wish to live, and your duty is

to live. I ask you to come and talk over all this. You can eat or not, as you like; but we can consult together as to the best course to be pursued, and decide in what way to act. I am ready to go with you anywhere. I suppose that you don't intend to return to Vésinet to-night?"

"No. I told my daughter that I should stay in Paris to settle my account with the notary."

"Come with me, then," said Souscarrière, passing his arm through his friend's.

The count allowed himself to be led away. He had no will left.

"Guy remained down there, did he not?" asked the ex-colonel, as they walked on.

"Yes. I hadn't the courage to deprive him of the pleasure of spending the evening with Madeleine, and as my cousin is there——"

"They know nothing yet, then!"

"No. They have still a few hours' happiness left them."

"And they will learn the truth only too soon. You acted rightly in saying nothing to-day. Let us go in."

Souscarrière then urged Maugars to climb the stairs leading to the upper floor of the restaurant, followed him, and asked the first waiter they met to show them to a private room. "Bring us what you like," said he, "and don't allow any one to disturb us."

Then, left alone with Maugars, who had thrown himself upon a sofa, he said: "Let us begin at the beginning. Where was your son-in-law arrested?"

"Two steps from here. He was at the wicket of the Saint-Germain line waiting to buy a ticket."

"At what time?"

"At eight o'clock."

"The very time when I was going to the theatre. I must have almost met him."

"You would not have recognised him. He wore a workman's frock and had shaved off his moustache. It required the keen eyes of a detective to identify him."

The waiter came back at this moment with some dishes, followed by a butler, who was carrying various bottles in baskets.

"Now," said the energetic uncle, "I suppose that you did not fail to ask the detective what he thought of your son-in-law's case? What does he think of it? Does he believe him to be guilty?"

"He did not say so. He only said that Estelan did not show the least concern when he was taken before a magistrate; that he strongly asserted his innocence, and announced with perfect coolness that it would be proved at once."

"That means nothing. All accused persons sing the same song. How does your son-in-law explain his escape through the window on his wedding-day?"

"He declares that when he leaped from it he intended to kill himself, but having miraculously survived, he determined to live, in order to clear himself."

"Of course. He can scarcely find anything else to say. But where did he go after his leap?"

"To the house of a friend, whose name he refuses to tell."

"I suspect that I know who the friend is. He must be very devoted to give him an asylum under such circumstances. I do not see any one who would do this but the Monsieur Aubijoux of whom I told you."

"What does it matter who it was? My son-in-law is arrested, my name is disgraced——"

"Was he accidentally caught?"

"No. In the morning the public prosecutor received an anonymous letter which informed him that Estelan was in Paris; that no one knew where he was hiding; but that he went out every evening dressed as a workman, and took the train to Saint-Germain. The public prosecutor transmitted this information to the prefecture of police which did not attach any great importance to it, for it was believed that the body found in the Bois de Boulogne was Estelan's, and the certificate of the deceased was already prepared. However, to satisfy his conscience, the chief of the secret police sent two detectives to the station, men who knew Estelan from having seen him at the Trinité, and they arrested him the same evening."

"They ought to have taken him when he had bought his ticket," muttered Sousecarrière. "They would have known then where he went every night."

"What good would that have done?" muttered Maugars, shrugging his shoulders.

"But they would have known, then, whether he went to your villa at Vésinet."

"What! do you think that he had the audacity to——"

"Remember the scene of the other evening, that vagabond in disguise whom my nephew followed, and the bouquet of roses which he threw down as he fled——"

"What!—could that have been he? The marchioness declares that since that occasion the gardener has every morning found a similar bunch of flowers thrown over the garden railing during the night."

"I'll venture to say that he did not find any this morning. The flowers were for your daughter, and Estelan brought them."

"My daughter! how dare he presume to love her?"

"My dear friend you quite forget that she is his wife after all, his wife by law; that he has a right over her, and doubtless flatters himself that her heart is his. Besides, the imprudence which he has evinced in trying to see her from afar proves that he has never renounced the hope of re-appearing completely cleared. If he had not relied upon the prosecution being stopped or upon a full acquittal he would not have amused himself with those sentimental excursions, instead of crossing the frontier."

"You talk lightly of all these mysteries, and attempt to clear them up," replied Maugars. "But you can't alter the fact that Madeleine's situation and mine are desperate."

"Desperate is an exaggerated term. The situation is a very sad one for my nephew also, and I suffer from it as much as others. We need to know all its bearings, for we are quite in the dark about it. How did the detective explain the mistake which every one seems to have made about the suicide? The detectives, just like every one else, seem to have taken the man who blew out his brains in the thicket for Estelan, for they were on the point of officially recording the death of your son-in-law."

"The letter placed beside the body deceived them, so the detective said. He added that it was in the same handwriting as all the denunciations sent to the public prosecutor concerning Estelan. The communication they received yesterday was evidently written by the man who sent the first two notes, together with the one found near the fellow who

committed suicide. The detective showed me that letter and the last anonymous communication as well, and the handwriting of both of them was alike. The detective added that it was the same with the earlier denunciations."

"Good! I see now that all this cowardly work has been done by one man. The kind warning sent to Estelan to induce him to leave his place of refuge concealed a trap; that's clear. The scoundrel who has sworn his ruin missed his mark the first time, but he set about it in another way. He has spied upon all the clandestine movements of your son-in-law, and as soon as he was sure that he was right as to his identity, he informed the police. But I don't understand how it is that the note sent to Estelan came to be found beside a gentleman who had just shot himself in the Bois de Boulogne. It wasn't the wind that carried the paper there, and surely not the postman. Can you explain this strange circumstance?"

"I can't. I have had thoughts which I have refused to entertain. I have thought of chances by which the man who committed suicide might have received a letter which was not meant for him."

"That is absurd! He would not have kept it carefully up to the very moment when he blew out his brains."

"I thought, too, that the man who shot himself might perhaps be the accuser, who was seized with remorse and had blown out his brains instead of sending the perfidious warning——"

"That also is impossible, for he has begun again, you see, long after the death of this unknown man. What does the detective say of this strange enigma?"

"He looks upon things as a police-agent naturally would, and suspects that the letter was placed beside the body by its writer, who wished to have it believed that Estelan was dead."

"What interest could he have of that kind, as he wanted to have him arrested? He must have guessed that some one very like Estelan was going to commit suicide expressly to enable him to utilise that letter. And he must have found a chance to thrust the note in the dead man's hand, for it can't be supposed that the letter was brought there after the man's death. I was passing on horseback along the road to the lake when I heard a shot under cover but ten paces off. Monsieur Frédoc, who was with me, went at once into the wood, and seven or eight minutes afterwards he brought me the letter. If any one had been prowling about near the body Frédoc would have seen him."

Maugars made a gesture which signified that all these conjectures did not matter to him. "Good heavens!" he said, "who knows but that the detective believes that you arranged that this letter should be found there, and that Monsieur Frédoc helped you? He said that you would both be called upon to make a deposition before a magistrate as to your strange discovery."

"What!" exclaimed Souscarrière, "they suspect me of having concocted a story—that is to say, of having lied—and at the same time they suspect that worthy fellow Frédoc? They are really too foolish! Then they must also suspect us of having denounced your son-in-law. That would follow on the rest. Whoever has done one of these villainous acts has done the other. They hold on to one another, and are interwoven like the meshes of a web."

"What can you expect?" said the count, with indifference. "The

police are mistrustful by profession, and they ply their calling without inquiring whether you are my friend or whether Frédoc is an honest man."

" You are right, that is not their concern. And, what is more, I think that they hardly care to know who wrote the anonymous letters. We alone are interested in discovering their author, we and Estelan, for the wretch who wrote them is certainly aiming at him. But the police have taken their time to accuse us. Why didn't the idea occur to them when the body of the man who shot himself was brought to them? They so little thought of anything of the kind that I was not even summoned to make a statement. As for Frédoc, he was with them for whole days at a time, and they never whispered their absurd suppositions."

" You forget that, at that time, everything seemed to point to the belief that the dead man was Estelan; but now that he has reappeared, they ask who prepared this 'dramatic effect' of the letter being found near the body, and why it was arranged."

" Yes, but that points to some aim. What aim can it be?" repeated Souscarrière. " What has any one to gain by all this? There was evidently a wish to have it believed that your son-in-law was dead. Why?"

" Perhaps to turn suspicion aside—to give him time to escape."

" No. He was in a safe place; if he had not been imprudent enough to leave it he would not have been arrested; and if he had meant to go abroad he could have done so the day after he leaped from the window. Besides, the letter is not from a friend but an enemy, and a bitter one, who pursues him without cessation and without mercy, and has done so for a year past. But I can't understand what he was driving at with this suicide business."

" Suppose that it has been arranged to harm me?"

" Harm you! The news of Estelan's death could not be a sorrow to you. Everybody felt that you could not regret getting rid of a son-in-law who was liable to be convicted of a crime."

" But if I were allowed for a time to fancy that he was dead my situation would be worse still when he was ultimately arrested, and so it has proved."

" I don't see how it could be worse."

" Don't you see that this last event will kill my daughter? I cannot conceal from her much longer that her husband is yet alive. After the first misfortune she would have become resigned, and she almost was so when you told me that Estelan had blown out his brains. I had decided to leave France, and she would have followed me without regret; for if she had not forgotten your nephew, at least she had not again begun to think of him. We urged her to receive him, you know, and we succeeded only too well. She loves him now, and it is no longer, as formerly, a childish love but a deep affection which engrosses every thought. I cannot tell you how changed she is. She does not speak, or smile, or live, till Guy is with her."

" And he only lives when he is in her society."

" What will become of them both when they find out that they cannot marry? Your nephew will enlist, I suppose, and go to seek death in Africa, but even in that case he will be less to be pitied than Madeleine. She will never cease to mourn him. Have you looked her future in the face? Whether that wretched Estelan be convicted or set at liberty she will be his wife, as now, obliged to bear his name, to follow him wherever he may go, to live with him—to morrow, if he be set free; in five or ten years'

time if he be sent, in the meanwhile, to the galleys. She might, perhaps, have formerly had the courage to submit to the fearful lot which became hers through this unhappy marriage, but now that her heart is another's it will kill her!"

"I can't even rid you of him with a sword thrust," muttered Souscarrière, who again thought of his original plan. "I can't fight with him while he is in prison."

"How does it arise that we are all in despair now?" resumed Maugars, with increasing animation. "It is all due to the cursed mistake which you led me into, the fatal letter found in the Bois."

"Yes," said Guy's uncle, slowly, "if that was intended to do us injury it certainly succeeded. But at whom was it aimed among us all? Not at me, who have lived so long away from you and from Paris. Not at my nephew, that isn't likely, for who could guess that he loved Madeleine? She herself is not in the matter. She has no enemies, and cannot have any."

"I have."

"Who are they?"

"If I knew I should not ask advice of you. I should go straight to the rascal who has not feared to strike at a poor young girl, who never injured him, in order to reach me. I should spit in his face, and if he were too cowardly to hold a sword or pistol, I should kill him. I shall never discover him, the infamous wretch! He is hiding; but I feel that he is acting in the dark, laying traps for me and spying upon my movements; I feel that I am in his power, and that an unseen hand, an invisible hand, which I cannot take hold of, is stretched out at me; I feel that I cannot escape him, and that he will carry his vengeance to the last extremes."

"Be calm, my friend, and don't let your imagination run away with you! The reality is sad enough, and it is useless to create chimeras which increase your grief. Refinements of wickedness, such as you have in your mind, are beyond possibility. Hatred like that may have existed in Venice and Florence in the fourteenth century, but now they are altogether unlikely. There are no more men with sufficient strength of character to hate so long. Quarrels are settled in forty-eight hours and then forgotten. The habit of rapid liquidation has been learned on 'Change. I have no great faith in the existence of this implacable enemy. There are circumstances in this matter which I cannot account for; the cause escapes me, but fatality is the chief motive power. Don't let us lose our time in fighting phantoms which only exist in your imagination, but let us consult as to present necessity. Your son-in-law wishes to see you, you say?"

"He has had the audacity to ask to see me."

"Shall you consent?"

"No. If I saw him I should strangle him."

"I think that you would act more prudently in avoiding the interview, which would only serve to incite you against him, and might end in violence. Still, one or the other of us ought to see Estelan."

"Why?"

"If only to find out whether he is guilty or not, by questioning him. I know very well that however innocent he may be your daughter will none the less suffer perfect martyrdom, but we must take measures in view of eventualities which may arise. We must decide what is to be done if Madeleine's husband is set free."

"I shall exile myself with her."

"That will perhaps be the wisest plan, but it is not easy to carry out at once, and Estelan may be set free in a few days."

"You believe in his innocence, then?" said Maugars, bitterly.

"I am beginning to believe in it. His conduct is not that of a guilty man. If he had stolen he would at once have gained the frontier, and would not have exposed himself to arrest by secretly taking bouquets to his wife. Besides, Monsieur Aubijoux, who is certainly a very worthy man, guaranteed him with an assurance which I must take into account. But this is not the question. Where will you go when you leave France?"

"It matters very little to me, provided I escape from Estelan. There is nothing to keep me here, for, by good luck, I have not signed the papers for the purchase of the estate which I intended to buy near your own. I shall avail myself of the funds which Pruneaux will give me back on Tuesday, and then——"

"Maugars, are you a man?" interrupted Souscarrière, who saw that the time had come for telling his friend of the faithless notary's flight. He hoped that he would feel it the less at this moment, for what was the loss of his fortune compared to his daughter's sorrows?

"Why do you ask me that?" said the count, in surprise.

"Because I have another misfortune to tell you of. Pruneaux has disappeared. The scoundrel spent all the money which you had the imprudence to place in his hands, and he has fled like a robber, as he is."

M. de Maugars started, but did not turn pale. "I am ruined," said he, calmly. "That is the final blow! I have but one resource left. It is to return to Louisiana, where I have a little land belonging to me—enough to enable me to live with Madeleine—and there I can stay until I die."

"You have a friend in me, and all that I possess is at your disposal. We shall return to the plan you speak of later on. Let me first say that I ought to have shown more energy as concerns this rascally lawyer. If I had run after him more closely, he could not have escaped me. We should hold him now, and at least have the pleasure of treating him as he deserves. Now, as regards your son-in-law, would you like me to see him in your place?"

"Would you do that for me?"

"I would, and I promise that the interview would not be an idle one. I will make him confess. I shall find out what he amounts to, and what you have to expect from him. If I could persuade him to vanish for ever, whatever result may follow on his arrest, I shall not have lost my time. I suppose that the law won't prevent my approaching him, and as I must shortly go to the Palais de Justice, the matter will soon be settled. As for your journey to America, you shall go if you wish it, for I need not say that I will give you money if you require it. If I were in your place and you in mine, and you offered to share your fortune with me, I should accept it without any scruple. I expect then, that, to begin with, you will come at once to La Bretèche. You shall only stay there as long as you like, but the great point is to get your daughter out of Estelan's way. You must tell her the sad truth down there. You will be alone there; for Guy, of course, will not return. Since the separation must take place, let it be at once. I shall remain here with my poor nephew. When I can go to you, I will do so. By the way, Guy must have wondered at the detective's visit?"

"I did not allow him to see that it disturbed me."

"But Madeleine must have been surprised at your sudden departure for Paris."

"No. I said that I had urgent business to attend to, and they were so glad to pass the evening together that they did not say much to detain me. My cousin must have wondered, somewhat, for she questioned me, but I said very little. She could not have kept the secret, and I don't wish that any one else than myself should tell my daughter of her misfortune."

"You are right. The good marchioness has feeling but she lacks tact, and she would not have spared Madeleine at all."

"I forgot to say that Guy gave me a letter for you," resumed M. de Maugars, putting his hand in his overcoat pocket and drawing out two sealed envelopes, one of which was square and the other oblong. He handed the square one to Souscarrière, and opened the second himself, saying: "This is addressed to me. It came just as I was getting into the carriage to drive to the station, but I was so troubled in mind that I did not think of reading it then."

He now unfolded the letter, and had scarcely glanced at it when he exclaimed: "You refused to believe that my troubles were the work of an enemy who had sworn to ruin me. He unmasks himself at last, for he writes as follows: 'Louis Vallouris, called Estelan, has just been arrested. He is at the dépôt of the prefecture of police. He will go thence to Mazas and elsewhere. All the papers will speak of this important capture not later than to-morrow, and they will talk of it for a long time, for care will be taken to keep them informed of the various halts made by the husband of Madeleine de Maugars on his way to the galleys.'"

"You are right," said Souscarrière, "in this last touch I recognise the amiable correspondent who has been persecuting us for the last six weeks."

"The public," continued M. de Maugars, still reading the letter, "will learn another piece of news which interests Monsieur de Maugars. The notary Pruneaux has just taken flight, leaving enormous debts behind him, and the sum which Monsieur de Maugars had deposited in his hands is completely lost."

"He knew this, also, you see," said the ex-colonel, angrily. "The rascal is extraordinarily well informed."

"The Count de Maugars is ruined, as all he possessed was in Pruneaux's hands. Before long he will be disgraced, for his son-in-law will go through a trial at the assize court, and will very probably be convicted of theft. If by chance he should not be convicted Monsieur de Maugars' situation will be none the less painful. His daughter, who believes herself to be a widow, intended to marry a young man whom she idolises, and whom she has really loved a little too soon. She must follow her husband's fate, and he is not disposed to give up his conjugal rights."

"The infamous wretch!" murmured Madeleine's father; "he has foreseen and calculated everything."

"Yes," said Souscarrière; "but what astonishes me is that he knows what goes on in your family, and I wonder where he got his information from. We shall return to the subject. Go on!"

The count resumed, in a husky voice: "Monsieur de Maugars is therefore completely crushed. He is wounded in his fortune, his pride, and his dearest affections. Does he think that chance alone has brought about

his misfortunes ? If so, he is mistaken. A man has been the cause of all—a man who has followed Louis Vallouris, step by step, from the day of his introduction to Monsieur de Maugars. This man knew Louis Vallouris' past, although he had assumed the name of Estelan, and he waited to denounce him until his civil marriage was an accomplished fact. If the police had only arrested the affianced husband of Mademoiselle de Maugars, the count would not have suffered enough."

"Ah ! the venomous scamp !" exclaimed Souscarrière. "I should take extreme pleasure in running him through ! I hope that the end of his ignoble letter will help us to find him. Go on, Maugars."

"The same man could have given up Louis Vallouris a few days after his disappearance. But he foresaw what has happened since then, and preferred to give Mademoiselle de Maugars time to fall in love with a another suitor and promise to marry him."

"I don't think that running him through would be half enough. I should like to roast him over a slow fire," muttered Guy's uncle.

"When the time for his revenge was ripe he let the police know, and the lawful husband was caught. The enemy of Monsieur de Maugars has had the satisfaction, besides all this, of largely contributing to the ruin of Pruneaux, the lawyer. His task was not a hard one, for the notary only asked to rush into the kind of society which has ruined him. It was sufficient to introduce him into it."

"This is monstrous ! unheard of ! In the Middle Ages this wretch would have willingly become a public executioner, in order to have the pleasure of torturing the innocent. But what does he aim at after all this ? Does he tell the reason for the savage hatred which he feels ?"

"We shall see," said Maugars. "Heaven grant that he may betray himself on the last page of this odious document."

And he read on : "If Monsieur de Maugars accuses the man who has planned and executed this revenge of being cruel, let him examine his own conscience. Let him ask himself whether, in the gay life which he formerly led, he ever cared to know, when he seduced a wife, whether he broke a husband's heart or not. Let him remember the time when nothing stayed him, and when he yielded only to passion or caprice. What did it matter to him that he brought others to dishonour and despair ? He went wherever his fancy led him, treading under foot with proud disdain what he called 'prejudices,' breaking all social bonds, and deriding all human feelings. To deceive an imprudent woman, and then to desert her to follow another, was but natural to the Count de Maugars. Those whom he but wronged were the more fortunate, but some died.

"And he went on, without looking back, pursuing his career as a Don Juan, without soul or shame, until the day came when he thought that he had made sure of a happy old age as a husband and a father, like the men whose happiness he had destroyed. He did succeed for a time in possessing tranquility, and flattered himself that his crimes would remain unpunished.

"Who was there to punish him ? One man remained of all those he had injured. He had suffered most cruelly. The Count de Maugars had deprived him of all that he held most dear. At the time when he, the count, committed this unworthy act, this man might have challenged him and obtained satisfaction. He preferred to remain silent and to wait. He wished more than a duel could give him—he wished a revenge proportionate to the outrage inflicted upon him, and the atrocious sufferings

which he had endured. He swore to apply to his enemy the law of retaliation; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. He waited for twenty years, and has now been able to revenge himself in part. Monsieur de Maugars' wife died far from France, but he had a cherished daughter. He has been wounded through her, and now this man tells him what he has done, and that *he did it.*"

"It seems to me that I am dreaming," exclaimed Souscarrière, dashing his heavy fist upon the table. "What a miserable scoundrel! Where the devil did you meet with this wild beast?"

The count resumed his reading without replying. He was very pale and his hands trembled. "Let not Monsieur de Maugars believe that his enemy is a coward. That will soon be made clear. The author of this letter will wait until the fate of Louis Vallouris is settled. He wishes to enjoy his vengeance to the utmost. But when he knows what amount of shame and despair the future reserves for the count and his daughter he will come forward and propose to the man he hates a duel to the very death. Meantime, he sends him the assurance of his utter contempt."

This was all. The count let the letter fall, and said: "There is no course remaining to me now but death."

"I should not talk of dying if I were you," exclaimed Souscarrière. "Don't let yourself be cast down by the threats of this Russian. Take courage, my old Maugars! We shall conquer him, and I shall begin by trying to find him, for I don't rely in the least upon his promise to come forward. That is mere bragging. Had he any blood in his veins he would have begun by a challenge instead of plotting infamous things. But I will find him, the villain, or I'll know why. And when I do, I can assure you that he shall not escape me. But you must help me to find him."

"In what way?"

"Search your memory. It is not every day that a man can be found who is capable of waiting twenty years to revenge himself like a very Borgia. This wrathful fellow cannot be like other people. There must be some recollection of him in your mind. There is a passage in his letter which may help you; he says that you 'deprived him of all he held most dear;' and one might suppose that you carried some one off! Have you anything of that sort on your conscience?"

M. de Maugars started.

"Have I guessed correctly?" asked Souscarrière.

"It happened once," said the count, with some hesitation, "that a woman left her husband for my sake, but I did not know him. I never saw him."

"Then you did not meet his wife in society?"

"No—not at all."

"You were received at her house?"

"No. She belonged to a good circle, although not to the very highest society. But she preferred not to receive me at her house. Our acquaintance resulted from the merest chance, an act of politeness to a stranger."

"Shall I offend you by asking how it ended?"

"She is dead."

"Her husband never interfered with you?"

"Never. He, too, must be dead."

"That might be ascertained."

"I know of no one bearing the same name."

"Persons sometimes change their names. It is evident to me that the man who wrote this letter lives in our midst, I might almost say in your

house, as he knows all that goes on there. Now, I myself was ignorant of your son-in-law's arrest."

"It is not surprising that this man should have known it before you, for it was he who denounced Estelan for the second time."

"But Pruneaux's flight was known to him also. How did he ascertain that? Pruneaux went to Antonia's house at four this morning. She told me so herself. He took the train for the north at six o'clock, after writing to his head clerk to tell him of his departure. Even now, there can't be more than five or six people who know of it. The anonymous writer must know Pruneaux or his clerk, or Antonia, or some person with whom they are acquainted. Perhaps your persecutor may know a woman called Rosine, who declared at Antonia's supper that Estelan had been seen and would be arrested."

"That would explain his knowledge of the notary's flight, but not how he knew that my daughter loves your nephew, and that I had hoped they would marry. You were quite right when you said that he must have visited at my house."

"But no one goes to see you now," replied Souscarrière. "Ever since the first misfortune you have been at Vésinet, and you only receive Guy, the marchioness, and myself."

"The wretch has perhaps bribed my servants, and made them talk," said the Count de Maugars.

"What could they say? They certainly don't know that you wished that your daughter should marry Guy de Bautru."

"They have guessed it. Guy passes all his time with us, and does not conceal his courtship of Madeleine."

"Yes, but the man who wrote that letter has certainly much more precise information than what your servants are able to give. Read over that part of his letter in which he refers to your daughter marrying again. He even has the insolence to write that Madeleine loved Guy 'a little too soon.' Believe me, Maugars, the scamp has been informed of our plans from their inception."

"By whom? We alone know them, for even my cousin is not aware of all. She sees that the young people are fond of one another, but I have not said that I should consent to the marriage. Besides, she has not left Vésinet since Guy went there first, and Guy is discretion itself. I am not in the habit of talking about my own affairs to servants, or to any one, and certainly not about those of my friends. We shan't discover anything by looking in that direction."

"Well, show me the manifesto of your enemy. Perhaps by reading it over I may see some starting-point for our search."

The count handed Souscarrière the letter, which he had thrown upon the table, and waited in silence until his old comrade had ceased to weigh the terms in which it was written. The dinner was over and M. de Maugars had scarcely touched it. He now stared vacantly at the faded hangings of the room where so many tender confidences had been exchanged, and at the mirrors on which so many women had traced their initials with their diamond rings. He thought much less of his fortune than of his daughter's troubles.

"I have the starting-point," suddenly exclaimed Souscarrière. "Listen to this: 'Pruneaux only asked to rush into the kind of society which ruined him. It was sufficient to introduce him into it.' Your amiable correspondent means by that: 'It was I who did so.'"

"Well?"

"Well, then, it is now only necessary to find out who introduced Pruneaux to Antonia, the singer, for it was she whom he was infatuated with. She received him just before he fled to Belgium. He hired the theatre where she was hissed last night."

"How can you find out the name of the person who introduced him to her?"

"She will tell it to me, sure enough. She has no motive for hiding what must be known to several of her companions. I shall begin my inquiries to-morrow."

"What good will it do?"

"It will enable us to come face to face with the monster who is making war upon you. I wish to talk to him as he deserves, and treat him as he should be treated."

"His death would not save my daughter from the fate which awaits her, even if you killed him in a duel to-morrow."

"I hope that I shall in some way be able to prevent Estelan from annoying her. There is nothing to prevent my fighting him if I choose. I am not his father-in-law."

"How have you any right to demand satisfaction of him? If he be guilty, he will escape you, and if he be innocent, he has nothing to reproach himself with. By what right would you pick a quarrel with him? He would be at liberty to refuse to fight with the uncle of a man who loves Madeleine, and aspires to marry her. No, my friend, don't indulge in foolish hopes. All is lost, and now I have only to go to die in Louisiana. My tormentor will, perhaps, not follow me there."

"Estelan may follow you to claim his wife. Besides, what will become of your daughter when you are no longer alive? Who will protect her? I tell you that I will suppress the people who have troubled her life and yours, and destroyed the happiness of all of us. What does it matter whether it is their fault or not? I wish that they were out of the way, and I swear that they shall be! I will see my nephew to-morrow, and learn what he thinks. As for the culprit, I promise you that I will find him in a week from now; and, as a beginning, I will help you through a man who knows Pruneaux, Antonia, Antonia's friends, and everybody, and whose advice will be well worth following."

"Who is he?"

"Monsieur Frédoc, my nephew's friend, who became mine and has done me good service."

"Frédoc!" repeated the count, thoughtfully. "Are you sure that this is his real name?"

"I am not sure about it, for I never saw his certificate of birth. But why do you ask that?"

"No matter."

"Do you really suppose that it is he who—but that would be absurd! He has never been married, and, besides, he is incapable of a bad act."

"I have no motive for thinking the contrary. But have you never spoken to him of the possibility of a marriage between Guy de Bautru and Madeline?"

"Yes," replied Souscarrière, after a short pause. "On the day when we found the letter in the Bois de Boulogne, I did not hide from him that Estelan's suicide would leave the field open to my nephew, and that it was my fondest hope that he would marry your daughter. I even think that

at Monsieur Aubijoux's ball Guy confided to Frédoc that he had loved her and would be glad to court her once more, if she were free. But I repeat that we both knew whom we were talking to. Monsieur Frédoc is a gentleman. He has always been very friendly to my nephew, and he favoured me with the same feelings, and took the greatest interest in the misfortune which fell upon you."

"But why did he refuse to call on me?"

"It was your place to call on him. It was for you to go and thank him."

"For having taken the trouble to prove that my son-in-law was dead? To what do you attribute the zeal which he showed under these circumstances?"

"To his naturally obliging disposition and the sympathy which he felt for Guy. Are you not sure of that? Then you seriously suspect him?"

"I am not alone in that, for the detective who called upon me wishes to make him explain the strange discovery of the letter, found so conveniently near the dead body as to make it appear as if Estelan had made away with himself."

Souscarrière was silent for a moment. He was reflecting about the anonymous letter. "It was written by the same person who brought about that mistake in the Bois de Boulogne," he said at last. "I can perfectly recognise the handwriting, which is very peculiar. It is large, legible, but not firm. The facts would all be clear, if Frédoc were a scoundrel. I did not go with him into the wood; he might have taken the note from his pocket, although he said he had picked it up near the corpse, and he might have dipped it in the blood flowing from the wound before bringing it to me. But it must then be supposed that he had it ready beforehand, which is a very strange idea; and we must also conclude that he is the hidden enemy who has been pursuing you, and whose wife you carried off, which cannot be supposed. Come now, in good faith, can you see any resemblance between this worthy old bachelor and an infuriated husband?"

"I tell you that I never saw the man whose wife died after deserting him to follow me. I never saw this Monsieur Frédoc either. He would be about the same age however, for you say that this Monsieur Frédoc is about sixty, and the man I allude to would be now a year older than myself."

"You never heard, then, what became of him!"

"No. I was not in France when he left Paris, where he had always lived. The affair took place between my first and second journey to Louisiana. It was speedily brought to an end by the lady's death. I felt the bitterest regret and remorse. The bad beginning had an evil end, and I had to reproach myself with driving a worthy man to despair. I was carried away by a mad passion which blinded me to everything but my infatuation; and the man whom I thus betrayed has every cause to loathe and detest me. But if it be he who thus pursues me after twenty years have elapsed, he does not know the full bearings of his act, and if he comes forward eventually, I need say but one word, strange as it may seem, to make him endure all that he has inflicted upon me in trying to revenge himself."

"You cannot tell me what this word is?"

"I cannot," curtly replied M. de Maugars.

"Keep this weapon in readiness, then, to use it when the time comes.

But you can at least tell me the name of the man whom you so deeply wronged."

"Why do you wish to know it?"

"My dear friend, I can see that, rightfully or not, you suspect Frédoc. I think that you are wrong, but I do not rely upon my own feelings, and I wish to subject the man you suspect to certain tests. In the first place, I wish to get hold of a few lines of his writing, so as to compare it with that of the document you just read."

"If he originated it, he would not have been so foolish as to pen it himself."

"Perhaps not. But it seems to me that, for a letter like this, a man would scarcely venture to employ a secretary. But however that may be, it is worth while making an attempt and if you will let me have the letter, it will help me."

"Keep it," replied Maugars, with indifference.

"And now, if you consent to tell me the name of the husband in question, I will suddenly mention it in the presence of Frédoc and see what his face may betray."

"I will do so, but I shall expect you to be very careful in making use of this test. The man's name was Yvrande."

"I shall not forget it. And now, my old friend, I again repeat that nothing is as yet in a desperate state, and that you may rely upon me whatever happens. Let me act alone; you will spoil everything if you attempt to do anything whatever. Go back to Vésinet, and say nothing to your daughter of what is going on, or to the marchioness either. Guy writes me word that he is going to return by the nine o'clock train. You won't see him, as you will cross him on the way. I will tell him the bitter news myself. To-morrow I shall probably be called before the magistrate, and I will try to see Estelan. I shall, perhaps, meet Frédoc at the prefecture, and I will then see what I can do in that direction also. I shall find out, at all events, how he accounts for the finding of the letter near the dead man's body."

"Do as you see fit, but promise me to conceal nothing from me, whatever result may follow."

"I promise."

"One word more! What shall you advise your nephew to do? Don't you think that he ought to keep away from my house?"

"For the time being, certainly. But I do not think that it will be well to tell your daughter of your sorrows. Wait until you know more. Make some excuse for Guy's absence. He writes me word that he will come to see me to-morrow morning, to speak of an affair which concerns one of his friends—a duel, perhaps. That is as good an excuse as any."

M. de Maugars made no objection, but he was far from sharing Souscarrière's view, being no optimist. The ex-colonel, on his side, felt that facts were wanting to convince his friend, and that acts must speak for themselves. He rang for the waiter, paid the bill, conducted poor Madeleine's unhappy father to the railway-station, and returned slowly to the Grand Hôtel to prepare at leisure a plan for the campaign he proposed to begin upon the morrow against the known and unknown enemies of the Count de Maugars.

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